THE LAND AND THE WELL

by

HILDA WERNHER

with

HUTHI SINGH

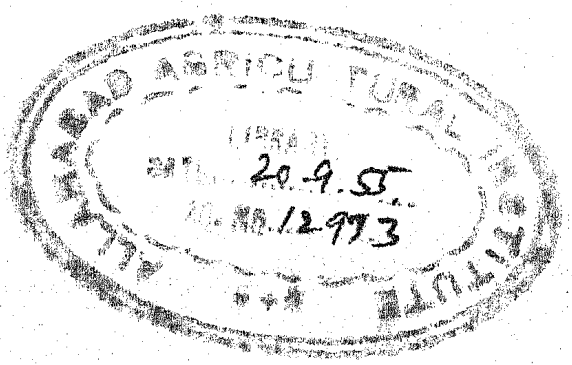


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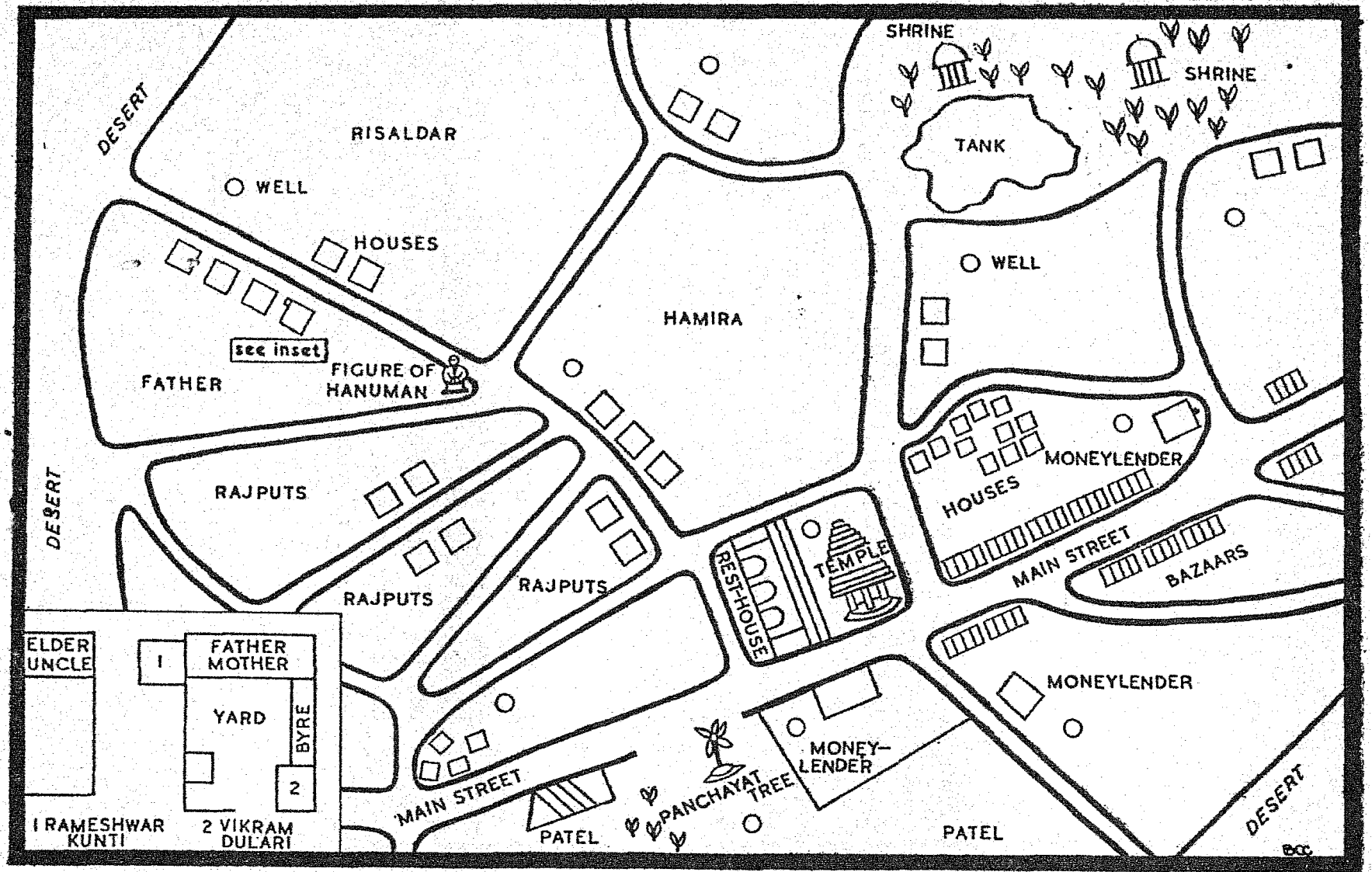
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AUTHOR'S NOTE

SACRED HYMNS AND SPELLS STILL SURVIVE IN MODERN INDIAN LIFE. However differentiated or localized they may have become in the course of thousands of years, they all have the same origin. The author has therefore decided not to set them down in the various versions she encountered but in the wording of the Artharva-Veda, where they were first recorded, using the translation in Volume XLII of *The Sacred Books of the East*, edited by F. Max Müller, published by the Oxford University Press, to which acknowledgment is hereby made.

The following are words for which there are no exact English equivalents and which are therefore used in the original:

Patel: village headman.
Kamdar: ruler's tax-collector.
Panchayat: village council of five elders.
Maidan: assembly lawn.
Seer: two pounds (weight).
Dharamshala: pilgrims' rest-house.



THE VILLAGE OF SITAPUR

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PRELUDE

I

SHOULD HE ALLOW IT? COULD HE?

Father's steps became slower and slower, until at last he stood still. Over the yellow sands of Rajputana the sun had not yet set. There was no need to hurry home. He wanted to delay the moment of his return. Soon his brothers would know, would show their disappointment, would want him to decide against what he knew to be the only right way. *Ma* would agree with him, he knew. Mothers always stood by their sons. She, too, would say that they had to take the safe road, that they should abide by what the priest had just told him. The horoscopes did not agree, so Vikram could not marry the bride from Gokulpur, who would have brought them so big a dowry.

Sighing, Father started again on his way. Dusk was spreading fast now. Round the Jat village of Sitapur the yellow sand hills—in places bare, in others covered with brushwood burned to a greyish-brown by the merciless pre-monsoon sun—mellowed to shades of mauve and blue.

Leaving the main street of the village, with its temple from which he had come, he plodded through the ankle-deep dust of sun-baked and crumbling mud. He went with unseeing eyes, but every detail of the fields to right and left of him was imprinted upon his mind from childhood. On the right lay the seven acres belonging to Hamira, who, with his surviving sons, kept his fields better than most of the others did and was usually among the first to get through his work. He had already

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planted all his corn and millet for the autumn harvest. But he had a well of his own, a reliable one, so his soil could be kept well watered. Even in the dusk that deepened into darkness you could feel how contented the fields were, how each grain expanded in happiness, safely embedded in well-fed, well-watered earth. On Father's left the fields were very different. A desolate feeling came from them, as though it were a sullen reproach, an outcry of the soil against its owners. These owners were Rajputs proper, not like the Jats, whose proud Rajput blood had been mixed with that of sudra women in times immemorial. The Rajputs felt too superior to bother much about their fields. Though by origin the aristocrats of Sitapur, they were among the poorest of the peasants, having no well of their own and scarcely troubling to carry water to their four acres from the neighbour's well, as did Father and his kin.

A well of their own! Father sighed again. To-morrow morning he would sow corn in the last fallow field. The decision about the bride from Gokulpur had to be taken before that. The mind of the sower should be pure and peaceful, concerned only with God and earth. If he is preoccupied with other matters crops are bound to fail.

Now Father reached the spot where his own fields met in a sharp angle. In the darkness he felt his way to the little shrine in which stood the brown-red statue of Hanuman, the Monkey King, he who had helped Sri Ram to the island of Lanka to deliver Queen Sita from the demon Rawana's clutches. As always, Father felt heartened in the presence of the statue. He could not see it now, but after he had duly bowed to it with folded hands he reverently touched the roughly hewn stone. Nowadays life was difficult for the peasant, so difficult that he did not know where to turn for help. He must contend with the wrath of the gods, who refused rain and damaged the crops with pests and storms, for the gods were angry that many of the good old ways had gone. There was the injustice to the

poor, with so many taxes to pay—yet even when they were paid by toil and sweat and starvation the kamdar might say they had not been paid, unless he had been sufficiently bribed. A man and his kin toiled endlessly on their own fields, and on those of the ruler and the ruler's officer, yet a field or two might be suddenly taken from him for arrears of taxes he had already paid. There was nobody to protect him; nobody cared how he fared. But one day there might come a great change, they might go back to the marvels of days long gone. Ram Raj would again hold sway throughout the whole of Hindustan, the reign of Ram Chandra, the king under whom there was food and justice for everybody, to whom the poorest could go for hearing and help, who bowed to the will of his subjects even by sacrificing his love and duty to Sita, his queen—Ram, who held power from the gods to make his reign a blessing for earth and man; Ram Raj, the reign of Ram! One day it would come again, and then all troubles would be over. It would be another golden age. Father bowed a second time to the image of Hanuman, that steadfast kingly helper of Sri Ram, the king, and felt comforted.

Half an hour later the men of the family assembled near the big neem-tree under which they always sat in council, except during the monsoon rains or the cold of winter. Had they sat on the narrow veranda of Father's one-room house, the women and children inside would have disturbed them with their noise.

They squatted on the scorched soil according to age and rank. To Father's right and left were Elder Uncle and Younger Uncle. The circle was completed by Youngest Uncle and Rameshwar, Father's first-born, who, as a married man of seventeen whose marriage had already been consummated, was now the youngest member of the family council. As befitted this lowly position, he did not once open his mouth.

Elder Uncle did most of the talking. Though bound to hear Father's opinion in deference and abide by it, he strongly put his case and that of the joint family.

"She brings eight hundred rupees! Think of that! Enough for a well of our own, and a pair of new bullocks, and many taxes! After the wheat and tobacco failing last winter harvest and the millet the year before, and three fields attached for taxes, and I needing a new wall to my house, and our daughters growing ready for marriage with no money for their dowries or trinkets, and not enough seed grain——"

"I know," Father interrupted.

"And so much interest to pay to the moneylenders!" Younger Uncle too wanted his say.

But Elder Uncle was not to be put off. "So many mouths to feed! With yours and mine, and Younger Brother's wife carrying her twelfth in her belly, and Youngest Brother's getting on with her tenth, and Rameshwar's wife starting her first! And now Vikram to be married, and soon there will be weddings for mine and Younger Brother's eldest, too, and always more mouths and less fields to feed them! We are blessed with children, thanks to Prajapati; but cattle do not flow together in our stables, nor water to our fields. If we could only have a well of our own somehow—near the land to which we can never carry enough water!"

"We cannot agree to the match. The girl is not suitable."

"Not suitable? With eight hundred rupees? What does it matter if she is limping? If she were not her father need not pay so big a dowry for her. Limp or not, there are many families in Sitapur who would be glad to get her!"

"So were we when first we heard about the match," Father replied. "And when I met her father at the fair in the town I was even happier. Big people they are, with three pairs of bullocks and crops that never seem to fail. Aye, life is easy over there!"

Gokulpur was a village eighteen miles away whose soil, watered by two rivers, was of a fertility almost unknown in Rajputana. It did not often happen that rich Gokulpur married one of its girls to such a poor place as Sitapur.

"Then why not?"

"The horoscopes do not agree," said Father with finality.

"What does a difference of one or two points matter, Elder Brother?"

"Not one or two. Three and a half points do not agree, perhaps even four. The Brahman said that he could not be quite sure. Though the exact moment of the girl's birth is known, we may have made the mistake of a breath's length in timing Vikram's. There was famine that year, you remember, and our thoughts were far away from us."

"What did the priest say?"

"He has worked it all out on his tablets, and I had to give him no less than three seers of wheat from our seed stock."

"But what did he say in words, Elder Brother?"

"He showed me his tablets, and I saw that he had done work for my wheat. These are his words. 'This marriage is both auspicious and inauspicious. There are many affinities in heart and body, also in character and inclinations. Equally do the number of their incarnations agree. But there is not enough affinity in either health or devotedness. There are either three and a half or four points of difference.' These were the priest's words. We cannot allow the marriage."

"The difference in health means her limp." Elder Uncle did not want to let go. The rich bride meant too much to the family. His mind worked quickly.

"Why can we not allow it? Three and a half points only mean that the marriage is second or, at the worst, third best."

"Dost thou not know, Brother, that it is third best or bad?"

Elder Uncle had to lower his eyes under Father's stern gaze.

Then Father looked steadily at the others, as though scrutinizing the mind of each. Seeing perplexity on Rameshwar's face, he began to explain, more to reassure himself than because the well-known facts needed explanation. "Son, thou knowest that with us marriage is a sacrament, given and blessed by the gods. There are thirty-six points on which a boy's and a girl's horoscopes can agree or disagree. By our Hindu tradition it is essential that there be affinity at least in thirty-two points. If not the marriage will be inauspicious. Is it not established at conception and birth how much of goodness or badness, of health and illness, of affection or harshness will fill the boy's and the girl's present incarnation? They cannot change during their lifetime. They bring everything with them. That is why their horoscopes must agree. There are many possible combinations of affinities between two horoscopes. According to these marriages are graded as best, second best, third best, bad, very bad, and fatal. All of you know that a Hindu could never agree to any of the three last. To us marriage is sacred. Therefore it would be sin to allow the fourth grade—a bad marriage."

"But the horoscopes make out a third-best marriage, Elder Brother. Thou knowest this is allowed. Think of the well! Think of our daughters!"

"The Brahman said the difference might be four points."

"Three and a half!"

"Possibly four. That would make it a bad marriage. How can we allow it?"

"Because of half a point that even the Brahman cannot be sure of thou wouldst make all of us unhappy! Are we not poor enough? Taxes, bad crops, toil on end—must we always go on like this? This is our one chance. But dost thou let us take it? No. Thine own kin is nothing to thee. For half a point thou wouldst let us starve." Elder Uncle's voice had risen.

Father sat no longer bowed down. With head proudly raised he spoke to his kinsmen. "We may be poor, but we will do no

wrong. Five of us are assembled here. Thou knowest that where a few men are assembled there is God. Stop quarrelling, Brother, in the presence of God."

Silence followed. All of them thought of the gods whom they always invoked and propitiated, and of God who had been present in the panchayat of old, in the five men to whom the care of a village had been entrusted from the days of Sri Ram.

At last Father rose. "The Gokulpur marriage is not to be," he said. "Let us prepare ourselves for to-morrow's sowing."

None replied, not even Elder Uncle. Before parting they all greeted Father and one another with joined hands.

Meanwhile Vikram, the fifteen-year-old subject of the family council, was returning with some of his cousins from a visit to the ruins of the old Rajput castle. Surrounded by pipul-, banyan-, and neem-trees, the castle was the chief attraction for the people of Sitapur, young and old. The youngsters had played hide-and-seek in the labyrinths of the huge banyan air roots. Then they had gradually dispersed in groups, some to talk of the war news that now in 1917 was penetrating even to the remotest villages, some to talk of girls, some even to stroll towards the houses near the ruins where Sitapur's suspicious characters dwelt. It was then that Vikram had brought his cousins home. Father objected to their going to this undesirable quarter.

At the door of the house Vikram met Rameshwar. "Thy Gokulpur marriage is not to be," said the elder brother. "Elder Uncle was furious and behaved disrespectfully to Father. He was so eager to get all that money! But the horoscopes don't properly agree, so Father put his foot down. No money-pot for thee, Little Brother! How wouldst thou have liked a limping bride, eh? Perhaps she was pock-marked, too. What pleasure it would have been for thee!"

Vikram did not pay much heed to his brother's words. Money-pot or not, what did it matter to him! Though, if you

came to think of it, it was good not to wed a limping, pock-marked bride. He would not have liked it, he suddenly felt sure of that. It was easy for Rameshwar to make fun of him—he with Kunti, that shapely wife of his whose brass bangles and anklets seemed to garland her small wrists and ankles like flowers. What luck to be rid of an ugly bride! He was not much interested in marriage, but since he had to wed, he would not mind having a girl like Kunti. Those movements of hers—no, he wouldn't mind. With a smile Vikram turned into the house.

He was sleepy, and to-morrow he had to help with the sowing.

II

AT THIS SAME HOUR, IN THE VILLAGE OF GOVINDPUR, DULARI, WHO was destined to become Vikram's wife in due course—though neither knew of the other's existence—opened her eyes in the darkness. There was an unfamiliar feeling about the room in which she slept with her mother, her sisters, and the small babies. Lately Auntie, being left a widow, had come to join them. Eleven-year-old Dulari liked Auntie very much. She was only a few years older than herself and was a good playmate and companion at the well. But during the last days everything had somehow changed. Mother did not speak to Auntie, and even pushed her roughly when they met by accident. Now Auntie had gone to sleep in Father's youngest brother's house. Why?

Bending to where Mother slept on the floor with the three smallest babies cuddled against her, Dulari found her gone. This had never happened before. Whenever Dulari had wanted Mother, she had been there to turn to. Frightened to be in the demon-infested dark alone with the smaller children, Dulari was

about to cry out when she was arrested by the stifled sounds of words and wails from the yard. One of the voices she recognized as Mother's, the other that of Mother's maternal aunt, who, like Mother after her, had been married from Sitapur to Govindpur in her time.

Soundlessly Dulari crept to the open door.

"There is no other way," rang out the aunt's voice. "So did I tell thee days ago but thou wouldst not let me bring the milk of the red she-goat. He has taken the widow unto him. Let us use the charm now. I have brought both the milk and the plant."

"That he could do it! That he could ever do it! I have borne him sons, six good sons, four of whom live to serve his old age. Now that demon takes my man away from me! He says she is his younger brother's widow and he must take her as his second wife. But it is not that! It is that she is younger, and her breasts not gone flabby with the suckling of his children. Accursed be she to eat her own offspring!"

"She will not have any from thy lord if we now set to work. Thou knowest still the charm against a rival or a second wife? Thy great-grandmother, my own grandmother, taught me on my wedding. Thine must have taught thee. Whenever a daughter of our family is led away from the house in her childhood, never to return to it, she carries with her the knowledge how to be rid of a rival for her lord's affections. Thou rememberest?"

"I remember."

"Here is the plant. Take it. I shall carry the milk. Will the children not wake?"

"No, they won't. And if they do——"

Mother's voice sounded unusually fierce. Like an eel Dulari dived back to where she had wakened a few minutes ago. She had to lie motionless as though deep in her sleep. In the darkness of her corner no one would notice that her eyes were open. The moonbeams lay over the two women as they entered.

Mother went to where she kept the two small grinding-stones —those on which herbs were crushed and spice ground, not the big ones which served for grain. Just before squatting down to begin crushing the plant she began to chant, still in that strange fierce voice.

"I take up this plant of herbs most potent, by whose power rival women are overcome and husbands gained.

"O thou plant with erect leaves, lovely, do thou, urged on by the gods, full of might, drive away my rival, make my husband mine alone!"

When the plant was crushed Mother's Auntie poured the milk of the red she-goat on the brass plate in which it lay, while Mother went on with her chant.

"He did not, forsooth, call thy name, and thou shalt not delight in this husband! To the very farthest place do we drive our rival!"

Mother's Auntie now led her to scatter the mixture round the sleeping place of her sister-in-law. Louder and louder did Mother chant. Or was it only her increasing intensity?

"Superior am I, O superior plant, superior, truly, to superior women! Now shall my rival be inferior to those who are inferior!

"I am overpowering, and thou, O plant, are wholly overpowering! Both grown full of power, let us overpower my rival!"

One crushed leaf was thrown on the rival's sleeping place, another on Father's string cot, which stood deserted on the veranda. Her head held proudly erect, Mother's voice now rang out, like that of a queen calling men forth to battle.

"About thee, my husband, I have placed the overpowering plant, upon thee placed the very overpowering one. May thy mind run after me as a calf after the cow, as water along its course!"

Proud rang Mother's voice, as if certain of victory.

But later, in the hours of the night, Dulari heard the sobs and moans of a woman who wept as though her heart were broken.

And that night Dulari resolved that, whatever her future was to be, she would never allow a rival to take her husband's love from her.

PART ONE

I

THREE YEARS AFTER THE NIGHT OF HER MOTHER'S WEEPING DULARI was sitting alone in her corner on a sweltering evening in May, expecting to hear soon joyful shouts announcing the arrival of her bridegroom's procession. She hoped it would be a large one, so that the people of Govindpur might be impressed with the position of her future family and the honour shown to her and hers by Sitapur. Soon she would belong there. How very strange that was! A place she had never seen, in which she knew almost no one, would be her home—no longer Govindpur, where every house and inhabitant was familiar to her. How would life in a foreign place be? . . . But these were bad thoughts put into her mind by evil demons. Home was where dwelt her lord and his kin. Home was henceforth Sitapur. She must not think of it as foreign. After to-night's wedding, after the toe-rings had been placed on her feet and the parting in her hair traced in vermilion by her lord in token of her wifehood, she would belong to his clan, no more to hers.

Mother and Mother's Auntie, both from Sitapur, said that it was a good place to live. Mother had often told her children of the great tank beside the ruins of the old Rajput castle, which held water nearly eight months a year. It sounded incredible. Water during eight months—Sitapur must be indeed a marvellous place. There were many trees near the tank, Mother said, neem and pipul and banyan. They spread in shady domes, and beneath it was cool and dark—so cool, Mother said that

one forgot the heat of the fields. What must it be like to walk in such shade? Dulari could not picture it. There were few trees in Govindpur, only the panchayat-tree and four or five that straggled near the pond. It would be good to see so many trees and the tank and the castle ruins. But would she? As newly wed and the youngest daughter-in-law she would have to stay at home all the time, to do the bidding of her mother-in-law and all her elders. Women were not supposed to leave the house just for pleasure. They could work in the fields, they could visit the temple, and they could go to river or pond for purifying bathing at festival times, but that was all. Suddenly Dulari began to smile. Mother had mentioned a shrine near the ruins, at which she had often prayed when a girl. That was where Dulari would go too—as a wife.

It was hard to leave Mother and the little ones who were as her own children. Had she not raised them from babyhood? Now it would not be she who fed them, put them to sleep, and danced and sang for them. Little Sister would now take her place and be Big Sister. But what about Mother? Ever since that night long ago in which she had heard Mother sob and moan Dulari had tried to serve her as best she could, to show her her love in every way.

She did not speak to Auntie any more, so that she need not address her as Second Mother. Auntie had complained to Father, and he had beaten Dulari with a heavy bamboo stick. But Dulari had not changed. Auntie was her enemy, because she was Mother's. The nocturnal charm had had no effect. Auntie had become Second Mother. Now she had three children of her own, with a fourth on the way. But Father beat her just as much as he beat Mother, or perhaps more. She had lost all her pretty ways and smiles, and nobody took much notice of her.

Dulari wondered whether her own lord's kin would be good to her. Everything depended on his mother and father. And

what would he be like—her lord? Mother said he was very good-looking, tall and straight like a tree, with snow-white teeth and a ready laugh. She suddenly hid her eyes in her hands.

The bridegroom's procession was near. Having covered the four miles from Sitapur in good time, the men now spread out to make the procession seem as long as possible. Let those Govindpur people see what Sitapur could do for its sons!

Vikram, in his scarlet wedding-coat, narrow pink trousers, and scarlet turban crowned with the silver-brocaded turra from which much tinsel dangled, drew himself up on the pony. This pony served as groom's mount for all the Jat and Rajput youths of Sitapur. It belonged to a risaldar who, on retiring from the cavalry, had brought home a horse and a pony. The horse had died, but the pony could be had on hire for grooms' processions. But the risaldar, from whose well Vikram's clan drew their water, did not ask money for to-day's ride. He was Father's nearest neighbour and thought a great deal of him. Pride welled up in Vikram's heart when he thought about this, pride in the clan to which he belonged. Others had to pay, but to Father the risaldar had offered the pony as his contribution to the wedding. Father was esteemed by all good people. Vikram doubted very much whether his father-in-law, whom he was to meet within a few minutes, was looked upon with half as much esteem in spite of his riches. He was giving his daughter two hundred and fifty-one rupees as dowry. That was much less than the money of the Gokulpur bride about whom Elder Uncle had squabbled so much three years ago. But to-day's bride was neither limping nor pock-marked, praise be to the gods and goddesses. Mother had said she was even remarkably good-looking, after having inspected her at the house of the girl's paternal aunt in town. If so the dowry was more than enough. Again Vikram felt proud, this time because his marriage brought a good sum to the family, and to him a wife who would do him credit. Up to

now Rameshwar as the eldest had had all the good luck. But now he, Vikram, would have his part in family affairs. Rameshwar had had to wait during three long married years for Kunti to attain maturity. Nothing, however, would stand in the way of Vikram's marriage being consummated at once. So he would be made a member of the family council without further delay.

What would she be like—Dulari, his bride? Was her skin really as fair as Mother had said? Was she better-looking even than Kunti? That would not be easy, nor was it necessary.

"We have arrived, lucky one!" shouted his eldest cousin.

With a start Vikram woke out of his daydreaming. Yes, here they were. They must have paraded the main street twice already. This was the bride's house. He must brace himself for the thoran ceremony, the first symbolic act the groom has to perform, in memory of times in which Rajputs and Jats had to fight for their brides.

With pleasure Vikram fingered for a moment the sheath of the sword. Like all his groom's finery it had been hired from Mohan Lal, Sitapur's leading banian moneylender, who kept the best stock of wedding requirements. He had three swords on hire. Vikram had chosen the biggest, not the one that fitted his hand best. What a glorious thing to know that in a moment or two he would unsheath it, aim, and strike! He must not fail. A second stroke was unthinkable. It would cover him with ridicule. But he would not fail. Had he not practised the stroke when nobody was about? Govindpur folk should not have the pleasure of laughter at a Sitapur groom's performance!

Now the moment was upon him. One breath's length! Another! The pony was being led towards a semicircular piece of bamboo on the thatched roof of the bride's house. The bamboo was covered with pink tissue paper, on which were perched a number of wooden birds. The great moment had come. Standing up in his stirrups, he swept the bamboo structure with one powerful stroke. All the birds dropped to the

ground at once. A murmur of appreciation arose. Vikram felt relief and pride. He had done it well. No blame could be attached to his name. Here were the women advancing towards him. The groom had conquered by his sword as he should.

"Welcome to him who with his sword has won the fairest maiden," chanted the women in ever recurring rhythms. "Suryia, the sun, led him hither to meet her whom Chandra, the moon, has raised up. The warrior has come to conquer his bride."

When the chant ended the bride's mother stepped forward for the door welcome. The gracefully arched veranda was four steps higher than the street, and when Vikram bowed his head before her she towered above him, small as she was. Slowly she waved over his head first a butter churn, then a spinning-wheel, and then a husking-peg. Suddenly Vikram felt his heart beating fast. These were the first symbols of future intimacy between the two families. Dulari, his bride, would take charge of churning and spinning and husking in his, her lord's, house. Her mother's gestures made everything real and near. What a tiny woman his bride's mother was; quite different from his own mother at home. Yet out of that tininess Dulari had been born —she who was to be wedded to him to-night, to be the mother of his children! Involuntarily he lowered his head further, bowing very deeply to his mother-in-law with folded hands in token of having accepted the domestic meaning of her action.

Meanwhile the Sitapur men were talking to each other under their breath.

"How much 'welcome' money will they give?"

"It is always too little."

"Let's hope the Govindpur people won't be too mean."

"They had better not! We are here to watch over the groom's interests. Like one man we stand by him."

"We'll show the beggars!"

"Don't talk like that!" Father looked from one to the other.

" First let us see how much the money is. Perhaps the amount will astonish us."

" Thou art protecting the family thy son weds, not the honour of our village."

" Shouldn't I? Their daughter will be mine to-morrow, the mother of my grandchildren."

" Then let their money show that their welcome is genuine! " said Elder Uncle, who had not yet forgotten the Gokulpur bride.

" It is genuine. Have we not heard how big a feast they are preparing for us? "

" That may be only talk. It is the empty vessels that make the most noise."

" Wait and see." Father thrust his chin out.

" Perhaps he is right."

" He often is."

The Sitapur men stopped their grumbling.

The bride's mother was approaching the groom for a second time, carrying the welcome money wrapped in a bit of cloth. Motionless she stood for a moment or two, looking at the boy who would take her eldest daughter to his father's house to-morrow. How would they treat her there? Would her mother-in-law be kind or cruel? Would she overwork Dulari? And would this pleasant-faced boy be good to his young wife? In the beginning he was sure to. He would delight in her, he would lust after her firm young flesh, taking his pleasure to the fill. Contempt showed in her eyes for an instant. All men were like that. At first they couldn't get enough of a woman, thinking only of themselves, never of her. That is what these brutes called love. A good thing that by Hindu tradition a bride was sent home to her parents after only three days in her new home, to live peacefully for another six months. If not what would become of her, and of that insatiable boy?

Suddenly she remembered her duty. Stepping forward she handed him the much-awaited money with both hands. Then

she drew back, while the Sitapur party craned their necks and came as near as manners permitted. Comments were made even before the money had been unwrapped.

"Those accursed beggars! Three rupees only!"

"We should have known!"

"What else to expect of Govindpur!"

"A rotten place!"

"Even a carrying she-rat wouldn't find a bite here!"

"We'll settle with them!"

"No, it's a mistake! She gave him seven rupees!"

"Not so bad!"

"Why, it's good!"

"Who would have thought it?"

"A good place, Govindpur!"

But the welcome money was neither three nor seven rupees. The bride's clan had fixed it at five rupees after much deliberation, taking into account the family tradition for brides as well as the status of the groom. Five rupees were more than enough.

"Can we now go? My belly shouts for food." Elder Uncle was impatient to get away, now that the all-important part was over.

But it was not over.

"Take care! Here they are at us!"

The Sitapur men had to dodge quickly to avoid a shower of small stones which the women were throwing at them. Then they had to pelt the women in return. In remembrance of days gone by, when only after a fight were Rajput and Jat brides carried away, there must be staged a fight, village against village, in mock antagonism.

"You good-for-nothings!" the women shouted. "Look how they duck and dive before our attack! Not one of you is a man. How we pity your wives! Each of you a sheep in the guise of a wolf!"

"With stones we pelt you, though if you were fair we would

pelt you with other missiles! " the men retorted. " Our arrows are too good for such as you, whose ancestresses were noseless for seven times seven generations! "

" Your arrows! No daughters can you beget, let alone sons, O sterile ones! " taunted the women.

" Noseless like your mothers will you be, your cuckold husbands at last finding you out and cutting off yours, too, O women! A wicked woman says there is a snake in the house, while it is her lover she has inside."

" May no son ever spring from your loins! "

" May no son ever enter your womb! "

Pelt.

Pelt.

Laugh.

Laugh.

The mock battle had reached its end.

" What will the food be like? " Elder Uncle asked his neighbour when at last the Sitapur party was leaving with the groom in its midst. The neighbour's wife came from Govindpur, and he would have been informed about the dishes awaiting them.

" The food will be good. They have hired the best cook of the place to prepare the meal, he in whose sweet-shop you get the most succulent sugar-drops. Many are the dishes they have ordered, so I hear from my wife's younger brother. There may be some liquor, too! "

Elder Uncle gave an approving snort. What is a wedding without proper food?

But some Govindpur Rajputs among the choice guests asked to join in the festive meal prepared for the groom's party were of different opinion.

" Why these accursed Jats do not eat meat or eggs beats me! A meal without meat! One can't get one's teeth into anything."

" Sop for women and children only! "

"They pride themselves on keeping the code. They want to make out that they are better Hindus than we are. Not even chicken do they allow in their villages."

"They are a ridiculous lot. We are their ancestors. We eat meat, as men should. What's good enough for us should be good enough for them by a long way."

"They are such sops because their fourth-caste mothers spoiled their blood many thousand years ago. Sired by Rajputs and not eat meat! Disgusting!"

"And with Rajput blood to freshen up the stock now and then! A Jat woman is a tasty morsel. That is why you will always find some Rajput or other who stoops to marry her. I wouldn't mind having one myself. The Jatnis work more than our womenfolk."

"Well, Rajput women cannot show themselves in the fields as Jatnis do."

"Exactly. That's why we keep our women in purdah. If we didn't we might be better off than we are."

"And lose face! Never forget that we are of noble birth and far better than Jats."

"I don't forget. Are not all my womenfolk in purdah?"

"We are better, but some of the Jatnis would taste well. To-day's bride is good-looking, so I hear. I wouldn't mind being in the groom's place to-morrow night."

"Nor I."

The Rajputs joined the rear of the groom's procession, which was just reaching the house prepared for its reception. The men had water poured over their hands. Then they rinsed their mouths and sat down on the street which had been borrowed for a dining-hall. In front of each guest were placed trays neatly made of leaves, on which the helpers poured food from gleaming brass vessels.

Vikram was served first, as the groom. He was glowing with pride. Taking precedence over everybody, even Father, Elder

Uncle, and the patels of both villages! Well, it was his wedding. He was enjoying every minute of it. Sitting at the place of honour in his long scarlet coat and turban, crowned by the ceremonial turra, looking forward to meeting his bride before long, and filling the hours until then with eating and drinking with the best of both Sitapur and Govindpur! And what food they gave you here! There were four different kinds of pulse, with which were eaten chappatis—hot unleavened bread-cakes—balls of dough fried in burning ashes, and bread heavy with clarified butter and brown sugar. There were three kinds of highly spiced vegetable curries. Seven main dishes to eat with one's bread! Vikram was elated by such lavishness. There were curds with crushed mint, with onions, cucumber, and dill; relishes from plain green chillies to complicated pickles. There were two kinds of halva decorated with silver leaf—sweets made of white flour, sugar, and clarified butter—as well as the sugar-balls which take the place of chocolate and toffee. And there was wine distilled from raisins and oranges.

Such rich fare! One would not taste the like at a Sitapur Jat wedding, except perhaps in one or two well-to-do families which had a son or a father serving in the Army. Vikram blushed with pride and well-being. For a long time to come his wedding feast would be remembered among the men of Sitapur. And what a good host Father-in-law was! Tirelessly he went hither and thither, seeing that the brass goblets were constantly refilled, that the trays were never out of any dish. Vikram felt like jumping up each time Father-in-law was concerned with his welfare, for it is for the young to serve the old. But, being the groom, he could not. All he had to do was to be feasted and toasted and made much of. How good it was to get married!

And to-night he would see Dulari for the first time. First they would take the seven fateful turns round the sacred fire which made them husband and wife. Then he would lift her veil. What would she look like? Would he see her eyes at least

for one fleeting moment? No, she would not dare to look up. A bride never should. But he would like to see his wife's eyes. He had a right to. What was she like? What would she be like —later?

"A beautiful feast!" said the Sitapur patel to their host after the meal was over and water had again been poured over the guests' hands.

"My thanks are due to you for having honoured me." Father-in-law was pleased with the appreciation of the meal and the arrangements. He and his clan had done everything in their power to make it a success. Those Sitapur people should not have occasion to belittle Govindpur hospitality. Let everybody see what the bride's family could do for their daughter. What did it matter that a new debt had had to be contracted with two moneylenders! He who marries his daughter off is removing a burden from humanity. His is a good action which finds favour in the eyes of the gods and goddesses. Thus he wins salvation for his soul and better conditions for his next incarnation. Dulari would have been married long ago had not bad crops and his own home worries prevented an earlier date. Well, this had been preordained like everything else. There was one advantage in having had to wait. Dulari had reached maturity three moons ago, which meant that her marriage could be consummated at once. Soon she would bear. In a few hours she would belong to another clan. Her father need not worry any more. He had done his full duty by her. Salvation would be his.

Father-in-law looked about him with content. The elder guests were sucking the hookah in turn, politely passing it on after enjoying only a few draughts. The groom's friends were chaffing him. Some were swaying to the rhythms of drums and clarinets. Moonlight lay over village and desert, yet in all its brightness it could not put to shame the radiance of the stars. For to-night and to-morrow Father-in-law was safely removed from his two wives, who were constantly nagging him and

bickering about one thing or other. How miserable they would make him, did he not keep them in check! Why, he could scarcely keep his sandals on his feet. Every moment he had to take them off to beat those accursed women into submission. What a fool he had been to wed his brother's widow! He had known no peace in his house ever since. Dulari, too, had always sided with her mother. You couldn't blame her, after all. She was a good girl. Soon it would be her turn to taste the sandal. Well, that was what women needed, to keep them chaste and thrifty. Blows and children, children and blows. That kept them in order.

Father-in-law was at peace with the world.

Little Sister came running into the room in which Dulari sat by herself. "They have eaten everything!" she cried excitedly. "Youngest Cousin has just told me. With the other boys he has been given some of the left-over things. The groom ate most of all!"

Dulari did not reply. It was not befitting a bride to mention her future lord. Little Sister knew as much. It was for her to-day to do all the talking.

"They had nine kinds of pulse. Just think of it! And seven curries, and five sweets!"

"And all pickles of Rajistan!" chimed in Smallest Sister, eager to have her say too.

"Of Hindustan, thou meanest! Nut pickle and cucumber and papaya and melon——"

"I wish I had just one of each! Big Sister, can't I, at thy wedding? Just as when Lord Ram wedded Sita Devi? Everybody was then fed."

"They were king and queen. We are not."

"I wish we were. Do kings always eat seven kinds of pulse?"

"Many more." Little Sister held a store of history in readiness. "The king is the treasure lord of riches. Clothed in grace

he moves, shining in his own lustre. To him heaven and earth yield ample goods, like two milch cows yielding warm milk! "

Dulari laughed. " Yes, kings have everything in plenty. Isn't Little Sister clever! She always remembers what the Brahmans and the *bhatiyas* [bards] sing. I wish I could."

" Thou knowest much more than I, Big Sister. And soon thou wilt know more still. A married woman does."

Suddenly shy, Dulari hung her head. The moment was so near. Soon she would know, very soon. Did she want to? Now that the time had come she was nothing but afraid.

But Smallest Sister came to her rescue. " My belly is empty. Why do men have as many dishes as King Ram and women don't? "

" Because they are men," replied Little Sister wisely. " Who has heard of women feasting at a wedding? Only the groom's party does, and the great men of the village."

" But my belly is so empty! My brothers and cousins have eaten the groom's food. I want to, too! "

" Don't cry, Baby, don't cry! " said Dulari, hugging the child. " There is cold chappati and——"

" I want hot ones."

" Mother has no time to-day to make any."

" Why cannot Big Sister make them? "

" For shame! Thou art a real *rakshasni*—a she-demon. On her wedding-day? "

" Do thou not talk to her like that! " Dulari kissed the little girl's head. " Baby Sister does not yet know about all this."

" But she should! " replied Little Sister, the righteous one.

" She will, in her time. When thou wert her age thou didst not know, either. Listen, both of you. There is a bit of halva somewhere about. Mother got it for us."

" With silver leaf? "

" With silver leaf, for good little girls."

" Where, Big Sister? "

"Be thou a little mouse, and find it." With a tender smile Dulari watched her sister finding the right place at once. Then Mother's voice rang in the courtyard.

"The women have returned with the washing woman and the barber's wife. The moment has come, Daughter."

The moment? Yes. It was her wedding. No more for her to think about Baby Sister's food. She must think of her lord only, of her lord and his clan—not of her own any more.

Mother came into the room and went straight to Dulari's corner. "Art thou ready, Daughter? It is time. Let us go."

Her voice sounded gruff, as though she forced it from an unwilling throat. She was about to lose the first of her daughters. The first and the best! What would she do without her child? Whenever work had been too heavy, whenever worry and bitterness had threatened to choke her, whenever she had been bruised by her man's blows or outraged by the second wife's impudence, there always had been Dulari, who showed with a caress or a tear that she wanted to help her mother carry the burden. What would life be like without her? The little ones were of no use yet—perhaps never would be. True, Dulari would be back within four days, but after that last visit she would return no more. She would belong to another house. The child of her womb, whom she had borne and suckled and loved, her little girl was a woman now, a woman who went away for good.

Mother and daughter faced each other, their hearts too full for words to come. As never before they felt the bond uniting them.

"Where is the bride?" the women called from the courtyard.

Mother became at once matter-of-fact and efficient. "Come, Daughter," she repeated. "The time has come for thee to dress."

But Dulari could not bear the tension of the moment. "Mother, Mother!" she cried out, unable to keep back her tears. She threw herself into the arms of her who had been home, security, and love.

Mother and child held each other clasped as though never to let go. One moment only! Seeing the grief of her favourite daughter, Mother forgot her own. She must not again show weakness. It was for her to give the child strength. The path of duty lay open and unmistakable. For a Hindu woman there was no other way to salvation but through her lord. It was Dulari's way too.

Mother loosened the embrace. "Come, Daughter," she said for the third time, steadily guiding her child from the room in which she had been begotten and raised for this very moment.

Dulari let herself be guided. She did not want to look round the courtyard, knowing full well what she would see. Before the east wall the wedding structure had been erected. It would not have been befitting for the bride to throw a look in its direction, but before her inner eye Dulari saw it all as she had many times seen it at other weddings. There were two festooned earthen water-jars, each supporting an earthen saucer filled with dry barley. Placed on top of the barley were two other saucers full of oil, with wicks already lighted: the sacred marriage fire. Outside the jars there were two posts, each consisting of six sticks of bamboo firmly tied together. They were joined above by a straw rope hung with pink tissue paper and tinsel. This was the marriage pavilion.

Having passed it, Dulari raised her eyes. There in the dark corner the washing woman stood expecting her, surrounded by jars of water. Without any warning the first jar was dumped over her head, while the assembled women looked on. Now the second jar! Strange that so much precious water should be wasted on her. Dulari wondered how many times Mother and Second Mother—the accursed one—must have gone to the well. Perhaps the aunties had helped, too. Well, it was her wedding. Only this once in her life would so much water be spent on her.

"Rub her down! The pouring of water is not enough." The

washing woman did Mother's bidding. Through her clinging skirt and bodice Dulari felt the woman's hands all over her body. Then more water. Then——

"Here are thy wedding garments, Daughter." The Sitapur party had carried trays with the bridegroom's gifts to his bride, and would bring them to the actual wedding ceremony. But one tray with Dulari's clothes had been duly delivered on their arrival.

Carefully Mother took up the skirt, well over twenty yards wide, the bodice which left the back free, and the veil whose graceful folds envelop Rajput and Jat women. All three garments were of the same rose-pink as the groom's trousers, the auspicious colour of joy and marriage.

Though Dulari had been shown the garments on their arrival, only now she felt thrilled. After the maroon and green and blue homespun she had worn all her life, like all the women in the village, these yards upon yards of mysterious beauty awed her. What would she look like in that finery? As lovely as her elder cousin who had been married the year before last? Lovelier? What would people say about her looks? What would he say—he whose name she was never to pronounce, he, her lord? She hid her face in her wet hands. The vista was too dazzling. She could not bear to face it.

Very carefully Mother passed the new skirt over Dulari's head, allowing the old and wet one to glide down according to the laws of modesty. She held the pink veil while the soaked bodice fell to the ground. Little Sister and Baby Sister looked on with bated breath. Was this rosy apparition their own big sister, who had plaited their hair and played with them all their lives? Baby Sister felt very shy of her unfamiliar raiment and drew back a step or two. Little Sister, however, drew forward to examine the bridal garments. Now that Dulari was going she herself would become Big Sister. Soon it would be her turn to wed.

Mother now led Dulari to the centre of the little courtyard,

The barber's wife was ready to start her work. She painted five red stripes across Dulari's insteps and a broad red line round the soles of her feet, for auspicious entrance into her new life. When this was completed she painted the tiny toe-nails rose-pink.

Male voices could now be heard through the stillness of the night. The groom's procession was returning.

"He is coming!" Mother quickly adorned Dulari with the brass earrings, necklace, bracelets, and anklets that were part of her dowry, finally slipping on the toe-rings that only married women are allowed to wear. The women left the courtyard helter-skelter, each anxious not to miss the fun that would be made of the groom. For just before the wedding ceremony is the one moment, cherished by women, in which they can play havoc with a man to their heart's content.

There were about fifteen women in the one room of the house, including some of the smaller girls. Three elderly women, two paternal aunts of the bride and a cousin, had been chosen to taunt the groom. Now they placed two stools near each other, and filled the space between with a huge pile of papad, bread baked thin as paper and brittle as glass. Covered with a red sheet, the whole arrangement looked like a festive kind of settee.

"Isn't it a throne befitting the noble groom?" said the cousin as Vikram came in alone. "Take thy seat, O lord, to recover thy breath. Soon thou wilt go in to meet thy bride."

"Be seated, O noble groom!" The three elderly women advanced with mincing steps, ceremoniously beckoning Vikram to sit down in the centre of the red throne.

Knowing the joke, Vikram moved to the centre, fully intending to throw his weight suddenly to the stool on the left. These women thought they would get him on the ground, but he would show them!

Yet what is a mere man against the vigilance of women?

Elder Auntie guessed his move, and like a flash her foot sent the stool sprawling. Vikram landed unceremoniously on the papad, as had been intended. The brittle sheets of bread splintered with a crackle like fireworks, and there was general rejoicing at this.

" Look at the proud groom, crouching on the floor! No good will he be to his bride! A coward, not a man! "

" Where are now thy lordly ways, O dust-eater? "

Vikram got up, his face as scarlet as coat and turban. Those accursed women, to floor him! If only he could go at them, if only he could give them a taste of his fists! But he could not. You can beat your own womenfolk, but nobody else's. Moreover, they had the right to taunt the groom. As soon as the wedding was over he need never again have anything to do with them. Dulari was not part of this. No doubt she was at this moment waiting for him as he for her. Let these old hags go on! What did it matter?

So Vikram put up a good show, while the two aunts began to chant:

" The bride is waiting on her wedding night,
She is waiting for her groom's bow and arrow.
At last he comes, but she begins to cry.
He has no arrow for her quiver."

Now came the cousin's turn.

" A bracelet has been placed on the bride's arm to make sure she conceives.
A son is born when nine moons have waxed and waned.
O lucky groom, go in with all thy armour,
That son to son be added, year by year."

Vikram did not know where to look. Everybody was staring and pointing at him. " O lucky groom! " one woman repeated. " Let thy quiver not be empty," cried another. Curse the bitches into seven times seven generations! Would they never stop?

Dulari's mother now entered with a bowl of curd in her hand. At once he felt sheltered.

"A ring has been lost in the sea of curd!" she said. "Whichever finds it, bride or groom, shows gifts of mind. Take thy plunge, O groom."

Behind the door he saw for a moment a pink apparition, deeply veiled. Dulari! If only he could rush to her! But already several women hid her from his gaze. Mother-in-law presented the bowl to him.

With one stroke he had reached all the birds in the thoran ceremony. With one plunge he would find the ring, too. Baring his right forearm, he pushed it straight into the centre of the bowl and found the ring. For a second he was tempted to exhibit it triumphantly. Never yet had he not pushed his advantage. But this was different. If he failed Dulari would win. Warmed by his own chivalry, Vikram withdrew his hand—empty. Let them think him a fool. Dulari would be pleased to find the ring.

"Oh, how stupid he is!"

"The idiot!"

"Not an ounce of intelligence in his blockhead!"

"The bride's little finger is worth the whole groom!"

"There! With one go she has it!" At the door, after showing the correct amount of reluctance, Dulari had given in to pressure, dipped her hand in the curd, and found the ring.

"O poor bride! No arrows and no wits!"

With this parting shot Vikram's ordeal and the women's great moment was over. He left the house, while they crowded back into the courtyard.

The wedding ceremony was just beginning with the arrival of the village priest. His knowledge of Sanskrit, the language of the sacred texts, was not perfect. Ordinarily this did not weigh on his mind, as nobody in Govindpur knew any better. To-day, however, he felt a bit uneasy. Perhaps some one among the Sitapur visitors might be capable of detecting mistakes when the groom reported the ceremony.

The priest drew closer the red shawl he was wearing round

his neck. He must show his learning and his holiness by insisting that every detail of the ritual be correct. Hence he inspected closely the set of copper cooking utensils which were to accompany the bride into her new life. They were being sanctified by lying beneath the sacred fire and the barley saucers.

"How many lotahs? Only three? There must be two more."

Mother produced two small urn-shaped vessels from the huge earthen jar which held her store of household goods.

But the priest was not satisfied. "There is one tray lacking. A bad omen for a bride not to have all the necessary utensils to take with her!"

Mother brought out the tray. Little Sister was making a mental note of it all, lest she not get as many things as Big Sister at her own wedding.

The priest closely inspected the tray which held the symbols of prosperity and fecundity, bel leaves, ghi, uncooked rice, and yellow turmeric, the symbol of gold.

"It is time to begin," he said.

Mother had summoned her eldest son, for the bride's brother should lead her to her wedding. How awkward he looked! Except for the priest and a few little boys he was the only male in the courtyard. Mother nodded to him, while she drew Dulari's veil deeper down to hide her face completely. Now the brother guided the sister from behind to where the priest sat squatting near the sacred fire. She sank down near him in the traditional posture of utter humility and abjectness which a Hindu woman must show at her wedding.

She could not be seen, but she herself could see through the folds of her veil. The whole world appeared in hues of pink—Mother, sisters, the crowd of women, and even the old priest with his red shawl and far-from-white dhoti. There was the sacred fire just before her. If she raised her eyes without, of course, raising her head—which would have been immodest in the extreme for a bride—she could see it strangely diffused in all

that pinkness surrounding her comfortingly. It was lovely to sit at her wedding, clad in garments of strange beauty and luxury, and with the pink veil between herself and fear. If only she could stay like this always, if only she need not go from this rosy shelter and comfort!

What wicked thoughts! Dulari caught her breath. She would bring unhappiness on herself if she thought like this during her wedding ceremony. The priest was murmuring the sacred texts. Now he was passing her a bel leaf. Slowly, clumsily she freed her hand from the folds of the veil and, following the priest's gesture, dropped the leaf before the barley-jar. The potent plant would invoke the gods and goddesses for the bride.

Again the priest motioned to her. This time it was rice she had to drop before the sacred jar. Rice, the most sacred of all the food plants, the most holy offering that earth, the created, brings to heaven, the creator. Propitiate the gods for a happy wedded life! Dulari could not follow the priest's chanting of the sacred texts, but she knew the meaning of her offerings.

Now she had to pour ghi, one of the seven purifying and sacred attributes of the cow. The cow, mother of the ghi, licks her young and her heart is full of love. O gods and goddesses, let the heart of the bride be full of love for her young, let her be fruitful and love-bestowing as the cow.

Her young! Would her first-born be a son? She would go often to the shrine; she would say many prayers and bring offerings so that it would. Only then would she have done her duty by her lord. How blessed she who bears a son at once! Mother had often related her despair when the midwife told her of a daughter's birth. The baby had died almost at once, and the next child was a son all right, but what suffering had there been between! Poor Mother! Tears welled up in Dulari's eyes. Mother! She did not want to leave her. Oh, why did she have to go?

There was commotion in the yard. Was it already time?

Steps, first quick, then slower. Some one sat down so near her that she could hear his breathing. Her lord!

Dulari closed her eyes. Even under her veil the light was too dazzling. Here was he whom the gods had preordained to be her lord, through whom alone her soul could find salvation. Here was he, close to her. Soon he would be closer, guiding her round the sacred fire, lifting her veil. . . .

Dulari reopened her eyes, looking through her veil at the hand which was near hers. It was no more she alone who now was pouring rice and ghi before the sacred fire. There was another hand near hers. Together they poured, mixing his rice and hers, his ghi and hers, and, purest offering of all, water. Whatever the priest motioned them to do, they did, and did together. He, she, both. The rhythm caught her. He, she, both.

Meanwhile the trays with the groom's gifts were carried into the courtyard and closely scrutinized by the assembled women.

"Necklace, earrings, bracelets, anklets . . . ! Brass, all of them!"

"No, look! There is oxidized silver!"

"Not very heavy."

"They could have done better for her."

"What can you expect of Sitapur!"

"And a groom so clumsy!"

"Still, they could have sent less."

"Oh, well——"

"Look at the clothes! Two skirts, two veils, two bodices, one pair of sandals. It is all as it should be."

"Thou wilt say next that these are wedding presents for a rajkumari—a Hindu princess!"

"There! It is time! Look. They are getting up!"

Hands were helping Dulari from her crouching position, hands not his. Now she felt how the priest tied a corner of her

rose-pink veil to her lord's long scarlet scarf. They were bound together. They were one.

Now they started moving. Led by her lord, she advanced with closed eyes. Only when a shower of rice touched her did Dulari realize that the first ceremonial turn round the sacred fire had been completed. It was Little Brother who threw the rice. For days he had been talking of nothing else. When the women had brought the parched rice from the baker's oven he had been wildly excited.

Again it was as though she moved without her own will, as though it were impossible to do anything else but go forward under his guidance. Did she only imagine that they were closer? A strange feeling seemed to pervade her body. Suddenly she felt breathing difficult beneath her veil. Was it so hot?

Again rice! Little Brother threw well. There was clamour from the assembled women. The second turn was over. Then the third. Now Dulari walked with open eyes, seeing the light of the sacred fire through her rosy veil. They were taking the seven turns round the sacred fire, she and her lord. Again the rhythm caught her. He, she, both. Husband and wife. Was she trembling? He, she, both, on and on. For ever.

Loud cheering and more rice greeted the completion of the seventh ceremonial turn. Everybody crowded round the bridal couple as the groom's gift-tray bearing trinkets and vermilion was brought before him. For one moment Vikram stared at the tray, unable to lift his hand. How sweet it would be to touch his bride! And now he was to see her for the first time. The jar of vermilion stood waiting on the tray. They were married. He must lift her veil. The longed-for moment had come.

"Unveil thy bride, O groom!" The priest motioned to him, while other voices said or shouted this and that which he could not take in, and did not want to.

Raising his hand, Vikram lifted the veil from his wife's face. So this was she! Against her pink garments her face seemed

whiter even than he had expected. Why, she was beautiful! How fresh and sweet her cheeks, her lips! If only he could see her eyes! But she kept her gaze lowered as a modest maiden should, her long lashes caressing her cheeks. Well, soon he would make her look at him. She was now his wife, ready to do his bidding.

Putting his right forefinger into the jar of vermilion with determination, Vikram traced the red line of wifehood into the parting of Dulari's hair. She was his. He had made her his wife.

"Become thou now my partner, as thou hast paced all the seven steps," chanted the priest. "Thy partnership I have gained. Apart from thee I cannot live. We each shall be an object of love to the other. Combine I now thy mind, thy action, thy senses with mine."

So the wedding was over.

Dawn was rising, bringing with it the cold gusts of desert wind. Everybody was tired. People dispersed to their homes, and the Sitapur party returned to the house put at its disposal. Soon everybody was asleep.

But before closing their eyes Dulari, in the familiar corner of her mother's room, and Vikram, some two hundred yards away among the men of Sitapur, repeated in their own Rajistani tongue and way the sacred words they had not been able to follow in the Sanskrit. "We shall each be an object of love to the other. Apart from thee I cannot live."

To-morrow. This was the last sleep they slept apart before belonging wholly to one another. His hand. Her lips. He, she, both. Her soft body. To-morrow. Apart from thee I cannot live. Indeed I cannot. To-morrow. Praise be to the gods—there was to-morrow.

II

THE GROOM'S PARTY SLEPT LONG. IT WAS PAST TEN O'CLOCK WHEN the men had washed and rinsed their mouths, ready to start the day, feeling somewhat limp after yesterday's exertions and huge meal. Father-in-law and his clan were already there, ladling corn-flour cooked with whey from the earthen jars in which it had cooled overnight. The visitors drank the ice-cold drink with relish. To-day promised to be hot. One had better take another goblet.

Vikram came out. He had discarded his long crimson coat, though he still was wearing the scarlet turban. To-day, as befitted the groom, he wore a rose-pink muslin tunic with his pink trousers. Now he took up the iron walking-stick ending in a trident which Rajput and Jat grooms carry.

"Look at him! Like a peacock he strides about!"

"When should he, if not to-day?"

"It is his great moment. Yesterday it was the women's, accursed be they. To-day it is his. Get on thy way, lucky groom!"

Leaving father and elders, Vikram stepped into the street, accompanied by his cousins and friends. He wished Dulari could see him in all his finery. But that was impossible.

From nearly every house people came out to look at him. Some lads joined those from Sitapur, so that the groom's following grew apace.

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After two or more hours spent in parading, they returned to the elder men. Again a meal was served to them, again Father-in-law was a thoughtful host. But to-day there were only two kinds of pulse and bread, with one curry, curd, and relish. There was but one sweet and no wine. After all, the groom was now secured.

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Slowly Dulari advanced towards her. Then she stopped still. If Mother would only sob as the others did . . . But she stood motionless of face as of body. Love and compassion filled Dulari's heart. Though she had always stood by her mother's side, battled against her rival, and thought to understand her sorrow, only now could she realize what it meant to see the man of one's love take another woman. Poor, darling mother! If only she could help her—she, who was now going to her own happiness. Outside her lord was waiting for her. His smile . . . his hand . . .

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"Be happy!"

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Sita Devi! She who had made Ram the King love her more than man had ever loved woman, who for twelve years remained faithful to him even though she was the hard-pressed captive of Ravana, the demon king, who emerged in triumph from the fire ordeal imposed on her to prove her faithfulness and chastity, who after but brief happiness was cast out into the jungle in obedience to the will of Ram's subjects, and in her exile bore him the twin sons Love and Kush, the ancestors of all princely Rajputs; Sita, whose praise was sung all through Hindustan and would be to the end of all days. On her would Dulari model her life—love, obedience, submission to her lord's will.

One more embrace, one moment more in Mother's arms. Then, deeply veiled but with proud steps, Dulari crossed the threshold.

Outside the hired palanquin stood waiting, its bearers having disappeared so as not to be there when the bride came out. Brother helped Dulari to her seat, carefully closing the red cotton curtains behind which a bride must make her journey. His was the last familiar face she saw through veil and tears.

The bearers and her new relatives returned, and the bridal procession formed. First came the band, with drums and clarinets being played for all they were worth. It was followed by Father with the three uncles and Vikram's brothers. Then came the groom on his pony, his youngest brother astride in front of him. Next was the bride's palanquin, and behind it the guests from Sitapur, and finally the dowry-bearers, carrying Dulari's garments, trinkets, pots, pans, spinning-wheel, churn, and husking-peg. Soon the Govindpur boundaries were reached, and the last onlookers fell back.

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II

THE GROOM'S PARTY SLEPT LONG. IT WAS PAST TEN O'CLOCK WHEN the men had washed and rinsed their mouths, ready to start the day, feeling somewhat limp after yesterday's exertions and huge meal. Father-in-law and his clan were already there, ladling corn-flour cooked with whey from the earthen jars in which it had cooled overnight. The visitors drank the ice-cold drink with relish. To-day promised to be hot. One had better take another goblet.

Vikram came out. He had discarded his long crimson coat, though he still was wearing the scarlet turban. To-day, as befitted the groom, he wore a rose-pink muslin tunic with his pink trousers. Now he took up the iron walking-stick ending in a trident which Rajput and Jat grooms carry.

"Look at him! Like a peacock he strides about!"

"When should he, if not to-day?"

"It is his great moment. Yesterday it was the women's, accursed be they. To-day it is his. Get on thy way, lucky groom!"

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after their filthy, sinful meals. Somewhere behind the Muslim quarter lived the unclean tanners, and, farther apart from them, the untouchables. Nobody ever went there.

Here was the rich part of the street. Two moneylenders on the left and one on the right, Mohan Lal, to whom he would have to return his finery to-morrow. What a pity he couldn't keep the sword a little longer! Well, his wedding was over, and he was a married man. If only it were to-night already! Praise be to the gods, they were now passing the patel's compound on the left. On the right was the village temple with its dharamshala to house and feed wandering holy men and the poor. Here was Hamira's compound, at the corner of which the dwindling procession turned into the side lane. Now Hamira and his sons left them. Vikram could see the shrine of Hanuman which stood at the angle of their own fields. At last!

In her red-curtained solitude Dulari raised her head. She did not know how, but she was sure the end of her journey was near. Hastily she readjusted her veil, which she had lifted when safely alone. Dare she peep out for a moment, withdraw one of the curtains a quarter inch? Better not. Some eye might be spying outside. People were only too ready to cast stones at a foreign bride. She must not get herself talked about even before entering her new life. Now she would soon set foot in her lord's home. What would his parents be like? Would she find favour in their eyes? Had he been disappointed last night when lifting her veil? No. His eyes and radiant smile had told her. Soon she would see them again. To-night—what would it be like?

Words—a girl's voice—now the palanquin was being lowered to the ground. Who would open the curtains?

"Elder Brother! Here thou art! Where is my money? Where my clothes?"

Dulari smiled to herself. That must be her lord's younger sister, whose task it was to welcome home bride and groom, demanding a ransom from her newly wed brother. How she

would like to peep out! But it was impossible. Mother-in-law might stand behind the door.

"Here, thou naughty girl! Now let me pass!"

"Only eight annas?"

"Didst thou think I had two rupees to give, Little Sister?"

"It's thy wedding-night, Elder Brother!"

"Let me pass!"

"No, I won't. Not unless thou givest me my clothes."

"Which clothes?"

"Those a groom must present to his younger sister: bodice, skirt, veil."

"I haven't got them."

"Then I can't let thee pass, and I can't help thy bride out of the palanquin. How she must be waiting!"

"Well, I promise thee the clothes. I'll get them on the next bazaar day in town."

"So thou sayest."

"Indeed I will, Little Sister."

"A man's word is as passing wind."

"Mine won't be. I promise, Little Sister. The best skirt and veil and—— Now let me pass!"

"Aye, what a hurry thou art in! Also a bodice?"

"Also a bodice."

"Pass, then. Here is thy bride."

Koshaliya approached the palanquin, opened the red curtains, and greeted Dulari with folded hands. "Welcome, Elder Sister," she said. "This is thy house."

Supported by the younger girl, Dulari rose, stepped out and went up the two steps to the veranda. There her lord was waiting for her. How deep red his scarlet coat looked through her pink veil! How tall he was! Now he was beside her. Together they entered the door, he, she, both. Together they greeted with folded hands a woman nearly as tall as he. His mother. Now hers, too. Dulari bowed deeply and pressed her mother-in-law's

feet and legs in token of the services she would render her in future.

"Welcome, Daughter!" Slowly Mother drew the veil from Dulari's face. The rosiness before her eyes vanished. It was in bright daylight that Dulari beheld her new family for the first time, that they gazed on her fair skin, her large eyes, her shapely nose and mouth, her poised head. Kunti felt a sharp pain in her heart. Vikram drew in his breath. What an undreamed-of beauty! Kunti was nothing before her! Why, in the whole of Sitapur there was no woman half so beautiful. And she was his!

Mother stepped forward. From a tray held by Koshaliya she took a fresh coconut, uncooked rice, and turmeric, symbols of fertility, placing them in the folds of Dulari's veil below her waist. "May sons and more sons spring from thy womb, O Daughter."

Hanging her head as a bride should, Dulari held the treasures to her body, while Vikram looked at her spellbound.

"Go, Son." Mother stepped between the two. It was not fitting for young husband and wife to lay eyes on one another during the daytime. "Thy friends are waiting for thee outside. Daughter remains with me."

Vikram went away to be heckled by his village as he had been in Govindpur and to boast of his exploits there.

Inside the house Mother began the introduction. "This is Elder Uncle's big wife, this the small one. This is Younger Uncle's wife. This is Youngest Uncle's. This is Rameshwar's wife, Kunti. He is my eldest son. This is Koshaliya. She is already engaged to be married. This is my next daughter, Lajja. Here Shushila, and here Shanti, my baby."

To each Dulari folded her hands in greeting. When the introductions were over the women surrounded her, fingering her veil, praising her eyes, her skin, her other perfections. "A healthy bit of a girl she is, with breasts to suckle many sons," said Elder Uncle's second wife approvingly.

She was offered drinking water, but nothing else. Groom and bride are forbidden food before their wedding night, lest they be excited more than is good for them.

The swift darkness of the tropics set in. Outside the jokes became more and more direct. Inside Dulari stood silently among the friendly women. Now that the time drew near she felt afraid. It was all so strange, the new faces, the new house. . . .

"It is time, Daughter." Behind Mother was Vikram. "Now speak both the bridal love charm, so that love may be always in your hearts."

Facing one another, Vikram and Dulari did as they were bidden. Shy at first, then with growing assurance, they pronounced the charm that spoke of their growing delight in each other.

"The eyes of us two shine like honey, our foreheads gleam like ointment. May our eyes with their brightness, our faces with their freshness, inspire us with love for one another. Place me within thy heart. May one mind be in common to us both."

The words were spoken. They could have moved from their places, but they still stood near to one another, still hearing in their hearts the other's voice.

Again Mother spoke. "It is time, Daughter." Taking off Dulari's pink veil, she put it into her hands and made her take a step towards Vikram, who waited breathlessly.

For one second Dulari closed her eyes. Now she could bind her lord to her, now she could make him proof against the lures of any other women. In a flash she remembered the night three years ago, her mother's unhappiness, her own resolve never to submit to a rival. Gods and goddesses, hear the bride's prayers! Bless the spell with which she now binds her lord for ever! Then Dulari covered her lord with her pink veil, clearly pronouncing the sacred words: "I envelop thee in my garment

that was produced by Manu, the first man, that thou shalt be mine alone, shalt not even discourse of other women! "

Mother pushed Vikram towards the courtyard. She and the other women followed with Dulari. . . . Now they were no longer with her. It was his hand that gripped her suddenly. From the starlit darkness of the yard he guided her into the utter blackness of the little shed that was prepared for them, even with a string cot. There was only darkness and he.

Now he was close, his hands caressing, compelling, opening the door of her innermost being. His hands, his mouth—was such nearness bearable? He, she, both. He, she, one. For ever. He, she, one.

His hands were still on her when she sank into the blessed calm that comes after storm. It was so quiet, so beautiful, to lie near to him, to feel his heart beating! Suddenly, Dulari felt a third presence in the shed. What was moving under the bed? Was it a cobra? Gathering her wits, she knew almost at once, even before a triumphant little voice cried: " It's done! It's done! Elder Brother has made Sister his wife."

Shanti, Vikram's baby sister, ran triumphantly from the shed into the courtyard, there to tell the waiting family of what was done inside. Jokes were shouted loudly for the benefit of the bridal couple.

But Vikram and Dulari did not pay heed. They were one, they could mingle their breaths, their minds, their hearts. Nobody could separate them any more. Did anything beyond them exist? Her softness, his hands on her breasts. His strength. He, she, life.

III

SITAPUR.

It is three days since she has gone. Three nights.

Only three we were together. Like a single breath they went. But the three without her are three years, three lives.

I shall steal to her village at night. Perhaps I can catch sight of her in the morning. I shall stand outside the yard. Perhaps——

O my love, my love! How to live with thee?

Govindpur.

It is more than a moon since I was taken from my lord. Nor can I feast my eyes upon his beauty, nor drink the magic of his voice into my ear. Oh, my lord, my lord!

Thou hast come to my village more than once. But my brothers, those imps, their hearts as yet untouched with love, drove thee away. Crying I stood, crying out for thee. They had no mercy. With jokes and stones they pelted thee away. Helpless I was. What can a woman do?

But though my body was kept back from thee, my heart went out to where thou wast. With thee it went. It is not here. An empty shell thy wife moves in this house. She will awaken only when with thee, my lord, my love.

Oh, why is life so cruel?

Sitapur.

"Mother, do thou talk to Father. Let my wife be called back. So long is she away."

"It is only mid-August, Son. Whoever has heard of a bride returning to her husband's house after barely three moons?"

"Oh, Mother!"

"Be a man, Son. Soon she will return for good."

"Mother—art thou as cruel as the others?"

"Hush, Son. Just one moon more, and we shall call her back."

Govindpur.

It is four moons since his seed entered me. Two moons ago I knew that I was with his child. With pride do I return into thy house, my lord, my love. A mother now am I, the mother of thy son.

O Prajapati, the Lord of Creatures, let it be a son! Let seed grow to females in other wombs—but turn my lord's into a male in mine!

How wilt thou look when thou behold'st thy son? Thine eyes, thy voice, thy hands—what will they say, my lord, my love?

Sitapur.

"Did the messenger explain that thou wert poorly, Mother? Did she make clear that my wife is needed for helping with the work?"

"She did, Son. But, like all such messages it was not accorded belief. When Koshaliya will be sent for like that one day I also shall not let her go. It is befitting for the groom to crave his bride's presence. It is befitting for the bride to remain with her mother for six months."

"Six months——"

"Five have already gone. Soon she will be with us."

"Why can't they let her go two weeks earlier, if we so need her here?"

"The time is six full moons, my son. Thou knowest. Once she is here, she will not return to her home for eight or ten years—or more. I did not see my home for twelve years. There were all of you to conceive and bear and look after. And when

at last I returned, my mother was no more there to welcome me. Leave her with her mother. Soon she will be here. Thou will set out thyself for the gona ceremony a moon from now."

"A whole moon!"

"Have patience while the moon waxes! When she wanes thou knowest it is time."

Gona ceremony. Parting from Govindpur. Homeward.

It is she! More beautiful, more stately! It is he, more manly, more dear. No separation any more. Together always.

Her softness. His strength. She bears my child. He is the father of my son. Oh, my sweet love! Oh, my dear lord! One breath, one rhythm. He, she, one. He, she, it.

PART TWO

I

HOW MUCH MONEY HAVE WE FOR OUR WELL, ELDER BROTHER?"

"There is the part of Dulari's dowry we kept in readiness. We may have something over. The millets are not doing badly."

"Corn too. There are more ears to the stalk than for three years past."

"How much shall we have over from the crops?"

"With this autumn's taxes paid, and a bit to the money-lenders to keep them quiet, we might have seven or eight rupees over for the well."

"Not more?"

"Even ten or eleven, if the gods help us."

"Elder Brother, how much of thy daughter-in-law's dowry have we kept for our well?"

Each man present at the family council knew the exact amount. Had they not fixed it at their meeting after Vikram's wedding, the first he had had the honour to attend? But Elder Uncle liked to hear the sum mentioned often.

Father gave him an understanding look. "We kept fifty-one rupees, Brother. Two hundred went for taxes and debts."

"Aye, and her dowry was but those two hundred more. Had it been about five or seven——" This was the nearest approach to an allusion to the Gokulpur bride that Elder Uncle permitted himself now that Vikram was married.

Younger Uncle always sided with Father. "Two hundred

and fifty-one rupees is a good dowry! We all would be glad to have as much for our daughters."

"Aye, so we would." Elder Uncle knew when it was time to retreat. "That is why we need our well so badly. More crops will bring more money. With thy Koshaliya and my eldest girl about to wed, there will be much expense."

"So there will," agreed Father, and the others nodded assent.

Vikram's heart was proud. Here he was, a full-fledged member of the family council, sharing in its every deliberation. It was on his wife's dowry that they depended for the fulfilment of their great wish. It was he who had brought her to Sitapur. Through her they now would get the well. Of what importance both of them were to the family! Life was good.

"Shall we start digging the well after the harvest?"

"Is it not better to wait until we have more money? Not that we shall ever be able to afford masonry. That must come to about twelve hundred rupees nowadays, with that accursed war having driven prices so high—except for our field produce. He who tills the ground always gets the worst of everything. But even a mud well takes much more money than we have."

Elder Uncle raised his voice. "What? Have we not waited long enough? With sixty or perhaps sixty-two rupees we can afford the well. The whole thing cannot cost more than a hundred and eighty to two hundred rupees. Why, we have more than a quarter already!"

His words made good sense. What Rajputana peasant can find more than the fourth part of a new outlay without going into new debt?

Father nodded thoughtfully. "Thou art right, Brother. We have all that money in hand, but more is needed. We have to pay the well-diviners before we start digging. We have to pay the well-builders. They will have to dig down about thirty feet. This is much work. If the gods bless the diviners' minds, water will be struck at the first place where the builders dig. If not

they must try another spot. It may take much more work than we think now. What if we can't find the rest of the money? What if the builders leave the well unfinished?"

"They will not, Elder Brother. Why should they, if we hand them so great a sum as sixty rupees? They know we shall pay the rest in due course."

"We can't hand them the whole sum. Hast thou forgotten the tax we must pay to the Thakur sahib for being allowed to dig? Our ruler owns our land. We shall have to give part of the sixty rupees for this tax, and more afterwards. So the builders might stop their work, and mud walls do not wait until we can complete them. They fall to pieces, and all the money spent will go to waste. What then?"

For the first time Vikram felt what it meant to be grown up. Until now Father and the family council had decided and he had merely carried out the work set for him. A decision taken by the family council was like an act of the gods, irrefutable, elemental as sunshine or rain. It had never entered his mind that Father and his uncles could have made a different decision. Now he felt the responsibility. If they could find enough money the well would be finished. If they could not there would be no well, and the money spent would be lost. How great a decision! And this money was Dulari's dowry. Though by every right it belonged to the joint household, he felt it was part of her. Part of Dulari possibly lost! That could not be. Let the well wait.

"What then?" Elder Uncle was so excited that he rose and stood before the council. "If we don't dig what then? How are we to face dowries and sons' weddings and more taxes and drought and plagues? Thou knowest as I do, Elder Brother, that our land could bring much more than it does. Look at Hamira's crops!"

"Hamira's land is surrounded on all sides by cultivated fields."

"Ours borders the desert."

"His is a good well."

Elder Uncle looked round triumphantly. "That is exactly what I say. Even with his fields surrounded by cultivated lands he needs his good well. From the west the desert encroaches on ours. On the south the devils have cursed us with these lazy dogs of Rajputs, who let their earth starve and thirst. They are no better neighbours than the desert. That means we have to fight both to the west and to the south. If we don't cultivate and water our land the desert takes away more and more. Look what we lost this year alone. Fallow lie the three outer fields that should have given barley. Is it not so, Youngest Brother?"

Together with some of his nephews Youngest Uncle had been in charge of watering the outer fields. Now he turned a dull red. "It is not my fault, Elder Brother. Many are the skins full of water we have drawn from the well, but not enough. The water in the well has been low. It is not our own well, and we could not take too much. However careful we are, some is spilled while we carry it. To keep the inner fields living we had to neglect the borders."

"And so we lost more than half an acre!"

Father spoke. "There is no reason to reproach anybody, Brother. Thou and I knew it. Did we not often speak of it, walking towards the desert on our land that was well-nigh desert too?"

You could depend on Father for justice. Vikram felt comforted. They had worked all they could, and it was unjust to reproach them. Elder Uncle was for ever nagging. Look what a life he led his two wives and his children! What must it be like to have such a father? Vikram stole a proud glance to where Father sat. There were no better parents than his. And now he had Dulari.

"So what about starting to dig after autumn harvest?" Elder Uncle returned to his subject. "Let us speak at once to the well-diviners and the builders. They will be very busy after harvest. Like us, others will have ready cash then."

"Let us ask Mother's advice. Younger Brother, ask her to come out."

Vikram knew that whenever Father's Mother was asked to join the family council great decisions were to be taken. To-day he was to see this for the first time himself. What would Father's Mother decide about the well, about Dulari's dowry? There she came in her borderless widow's garments. All the men rose to greet her with folded hands. However much she served them daily and in spite of her being a mere woman, they all bowed to her age and wisdom in moments such as this.

"Shall we start digging our well after harvest, Mother?" Father felt that it was not necessary to speak of money and risks, of drought and desert. She knew every detail better than any of them. "Shall we take the risk or go on waiting for some time more?"

"We have waited long enough, Eldest Son. Ever since I entered this house as a bride there has been talk of the well. That father of yours wanted it then. There was my dowry. Times were not so hard as they are now. The well could have been dug at the same time as our neighbour's. But thy father's father did not permit it. These were his words: 'If the gods and goddesses will us to have rain we shall prosper. If they do not of what use can be a well?' Thy father could not go against him. The well was not dug. My dowry went for this and for that. Still we have to go to the neighbour's well for water."

"And now thou sayest we shall dig?"

"Aye. It is time, Eldest Son. Life is more difficult now. So many mouths to feed and so many taxes to take away the bread that feeds them! And there may be plagues to come. It is a long time since the last visit of the accursed locusts. They may come again."

Faces fell. One or two among the elder men shivered. If

Mother spoke like that it meant that such things were bound to come to pass. She always knew.

"Grow grain and more grain, Eldest Son. Thou wilt need it all to weather the storm. Dost thou remember the great famine when men turned into beasts before their lives ebbed away?"

"Well I remember, Mother. So do my brothers. It is only twenty-five—no, twenty-six years ago. May we never live to see another great famine!"

"There will not be such famine any more, Eldest Son. But there will be many small ones. Many worries. Many mouths. Dig the well!"

Father did not reply. His eyes still held their troubled look.

"There is something more I want to say, Eldest Son. Our fields cry out for the well. Our water cries out to quench their thirst. There is much water below our soil, the life-blood of the earth and all she is. At night I hear the seed surge and urge and speak to me: 'Why must I die of thirst when help is nigh? Why am I not allowed to grow to grain? I will to grow, to feed both beast and man, to serve as fuel to the sacred flame. But parched and helpless must I starve to death.' This I hear, my sons. The soil itself speaks: 'I bear both seed and water in my womb. Their suffering is mine as is their joy. In them I breathe, in them I am and live. Each seed that grows upward gives me new life, each seed that starves brings me nearer death. The rain sent down from heaven is my blood, begotten and begetting. Let it be incarnate in plant and animal and man.' Thus speaks the soil. We need the well, my sons. The well needs us. The very earth cries out."

"We will dig the well!" Father had risen, towering over them all. His eyes were shining, all indecision gone from them. Praise be to the gods! Now he knew for sure. He too had heard soil and seed call out, but had not known the meaning of it. As so often before, his mother's wisdom had opened his eyes. "Let

us at once see the well-diviners and the builders, my brothers. The day after we have finished harvesting the digging of our well will begin."

"Our well," repeated the old woman softly. It sounded like a prayer.

II

WHY DOST THOU ALWAYS STROKE THE COT? AM I NOT HERE? AND better?" Vikram caught Dulari's hand. "What can that old thing mean to thee?"

"It is ours."

"So it is. But if it wouldn't be this one it would be another. What does it matter. We matter—thou and I—and this. . . ."

How can I explain to him? Dulari thought later, with Vikram's head against her breast. She often lay awake while he slept thus, herself too happy to sleep. There was so much to think and marvel about. Above all, the string cot. But how could she tell him? That would have meant admitting that at home in Govindpur everybody slept on the mud floor, except her father. His cot stood on the veranda behind a small mud screen, or during the winter in a screened-off corner of the only room. Every day the cot was taken out into the sun for cleanliness. At night Father slept on it, usually summoning Mother to his side, when even the small children knew that she was not to be called away by wailings or tears, lest Father kick them all. Later it had been Second Mother, the accursed one. But no one else had ever slept on a cot. For fourteen years Dulari had lain on the ground with nothing but some old cotton rags between her body and the mud floor. She had oftened wondered what the luxury of a cot must be like. Now she knew, but she could

not tell her lord. His parents' house was richer than hers. Here not only Mother and Father but even the married children had cots to themselves. Again Dulari's hand caressed it. Their bed had not been taken from them after the first three nights they had spent together. To her amazement and joy she had found it still theirs on her return. Almost reverently Dulari's fingers felt for the hempen strands which Mother-in-law had twisted during the winter when there was no sowing or harvesting to do. One day she would twist such strands as these for her son's bridal bed.

Dulari knew she should try to sleep. At four o'clock she had to rise, like the other women in the house. "Thy bridal days are over, Second Daughter," Mother had said on her arrival. "It is the harvest-time, and every pair of hands is needed. Being with child, thou canst not come out to the fields. Relieve other women from housework, so we can help the men on the land. Show what mettle thou art made of."

But how was she to sleep, full of happiness as she was? It was much more beautiful to lie awake against her dear lord, hear his soft breathing, drink in his nearness with all her senses. During the daytime they never met, except when she was putting his evening food before him, if there was an evening meal at all. But there were the nights. From dark almost to dawn they were together. Best of all, they did not sleep in a screened corner of the only room with the other members of the family, as she had expected. They had a little room of their own, just as did Rameshwar and Kunti, the first-born and his wife. Even a second son was treated well in Sitapur, this place of water, trees, and wealth. A cot of their own, and a room of their own! The bounty and the blessing seemed almost unbearable.

There was this house, its big room measuring fully sixteen feet by twelve. She had paced it one day when nobody had been about. And so high—about eight feet! Rameshwar and Kunti had a room about half that size and lower. When their

marriage was consummated three little mud walls had been added on the west of the house. This was their room, facing Elder Uncle's. During the six months of her absence Dulari had often wondered whether such a room would be added for her lord and herself. There was enough space left on the west wall. She was afraid of the prospect. So near to Kunti, the senior daughter-in-law? If only she need not live so close to her!

Dulari smiled in the dark. It was as though the gods and goddesses gave her special protection. Her unspoken wish had been fulfilled. On her return she had found her lord's new quarters separated by the whole breadth of house and yard from Kunti's. At the south-east angle of the byre a room about six feet by eight was made. As befitting, it was slightly smaller and lower than the first-born's. But what did size matter? Lovingly Dulari's gaze embraced the room in spite of its darkness. It was their kingdom, the shelter of their love and happiness. She looked up. She could see a star or two through the thatch of the byre, supported by rough bamboo poles. She loved it all: the thatch that looked down on them, the peaceful nuzzling and browsing of the cattle outside their room—two cows, one she-buffalo, and two pairs of bullocks. The beasts huddled together in the early hours of the morning, when the chill desert winds conquered the heat that the sand wastes absorbed during the day and radiated at night. Huddled against her lord under a thin cotton garment, Dulari felt warmth and comfort.

Sitapur was all warmth and comfort and friendliness. Only Kunti seemed frightening. There had been an unfathomable expression in her eyes the night that Mother had lifted Dulari's pink veil and her lord had exclaimed at his wife's beauty. Kunti had been kind enough during the three days of Dulari's first stay, when, during the daytime, the bride had properly hidden herself in the house lest her lord see her, which would have been the climax of immodesty. At nightfall the women,

especially Mother, had had to persuade her to overcome the proper bridal shyness and let herself be led to the black darkness of the shed in which her man was waiting for her—as though her heart and mind had not been there all day long. Kunti had played her part as elder sister, had flattered and encouraged the bride, had helped her with smiles and jokes during the ordeal when the Sitapur women came to look at the foreigner. She had done all that could be expected of an elder sister. Yet there had been something in her eyes on the wedding-night. It was jealousy, Dulari was sure. So far Kunti had borne only daughters. Perhaps she resented the idea that the second daughter-in-law might bear a son before she did.

Dulari pressed closer to her lord. A son! His son. Soon, very soon, he would be with them. Again she stroked the hempen strands, a smile on her lips.

III

TWO HANDFULS FOR FATHER. ONE AND A HALF FOR MOTHER. ONE and a half for Father's Mother."

"No, Younger Sister. Thou must try to remember. It is thy work, not the eldest daughter-in-law's. Father's Mother at her age does not want so much food. One handful for her."

Kunti and Dulari were at the first task of the day, the grinding of flour for the family. As in Govindpur, a back corner of the living-room was reserved for cooking. There were the brass and earthen pots and pans that belonged to the joint household. Dulari's had been added to Father's Mother's, Mother's, and Kunti's. There were the grinding-stones, the big ones for grain, the small for herbs and spices. There were the earthen jars filled with barley, wheat, gram, and corn, and the smaller ones

holding milk, curd, or whey. There was the horseshoe-shaped fireplace about five inches high. It was fed with cow-dung cakes that made the women's eyes smart with their acrid smoke. But it was too early yet to light the fire.

Mother and Father's Mother had already risen, Mother to feed and water the cattle, Father's Mother to say her prayers before the idol in the alcove of the opposite corner that held the family's tools: four pickaxes and four shovels, eight sickles, rope for hauling water from the well, buckets, and pliers. Koshaliya and the other girls still slept in the opposite corner to the west. It was just after four o'clock. Outside everything was still shrouded in darkness but for the starlit sky. Before the statue of Lord Krishna a small earthen saucer held oil and a cotton wick. It was by the light of this lamp that the two girls worked, but they did not need it. Rajputana women are used to working in the dark, in houses that have no windows, and light only from the door and holes in the thatch.

From the jar in which barley, corn, and gram were mixed in equal parts Dulari was counting out the handfuls, pouring the grain through her closed fingers on the grinding-stones that Kunti turned.

"One and three-quarters for——" A wife may never pronounce her lord's name. So it was for Vikram that Dulari was measuring out the grain! Kunti gasped. By every right of precedence it should have been for Rameshwar, the first-born.

"It is the elder brother's, Sister," she said crisply.

"One and three-quarters for thy lord," Dulari said in apparent obedience, yet pouring out already the new measure as she spoke. Her lord had come first. She had managed that. Kunti knew it is a woman's duty to put her own man above all.

Therefore she could not openly blame her sister-in-law. But she would find a way of letting Mother know.

"I shall now measure out," she said curtly.

Without a word Dulari took over the grinding.

"One for Jagdish. Half a handful for little Kispu." With that the males of the family were provided for. "One and a quarter for me. One and a quarter for thee. One for Koshaliya. Three-quarters for Lajja and Shushila each. A quarter each for Baby Shanti and my two daughters." That was all. Jagdish was much younger than Lajja and even Shushila but, being a male, he had to have more food than mere girls.

While Dulari continued the grinding Kunti went to her baby daughter who lay whimpering in a corner by herself, while her elder sister jumped about with Baby Shanti.

Now Koshaliya rose and Mother came in from feeding the cattle. "Hurry, Daughters! It is late. To-day we shall gather the green chillies, pumpkins, and cucumbers. Breakfast ought to be ready now."

Mother lifted the heavy jar of maize gruel prepared the night before and poured its contents into the iron cauldron. "Bring the whey," she called to Koshaliya.

When whey and gruel had been duly mixed Mother took earthen bowls and set them out on the floor. Then she went to the veranda and yard door, calling the men from their various morning tasks. She took from Kunti's hands a vessel filled from the cauldron and with great care poured its contents into the bowls without spilling a single drop. Then she handed the vessel back to Kunti. "Get more ready, Daughter. They will be hungry."

Taking the biggest bowl in two hands, she went out to set it before Father, who sat on the veranda. Kunti set food before Rameshwar, Dulari before Vikram. Then the two young women retired modestly, only to reappear when their lord's bowls needed filling, while Mother served her husband and unmarried sons.

Father's Mother fed gruel to Baby Shanti and her eldest great-granddaughter. Kunti now squatted down to suckle her second

child. Dulari watched with hungry eyes. What upright shapely breasts her eldest sister had, in spite of nursing already her second child! But how dark they were compared to her own fair skin! Involuntarily Dulari cupped her hand, as though to hold her son's little head against her breast. It would be sweet to suckle her lord's son.

But there was no more time for thought. When Mother had presented a bowl of gruel to Father's Mother, Dulari in turn served Mother, her three sisters-in-law, and finally Kunti, for a husband's sisters have precedence over mere daughters-in-law. Only then could she sup her own gruel.

"Let us start. It is late," Mother said. "Younger Daughter, see that the midday meal is ready in time. Shushila can stay. I shall send Lajja back to help her carry out the food. Kunti, help Younger Sister to haul up water before you follow us. She is in her seventh month and should not overstrain herself. Thou canst gather the cucumbers near the house, so there is no need for thee to walk out to the fields by thyself."

Mother, Koshaliya, and Lajja were gone, each having taken down a basket more than three feet wide from the poles where thatch and walls met. Father's Mother took command. "Come along, little ones. We shall sit in the yard. The morning sun is good for old bones and young."

"Wilt thou tell us something, Father's Mother?" Shushila could never hear enough of Sri Ram and how he grieved for Sita Devi. "Why did he have to send her away if he did not want to? Was he not the mightiest king that ever has been?"

Father's Mother looked at her wistfully. "Even mighty kings must bow to the will of gods and men. And big girls of nine have to do their share of work. It is the little ones I shall take out into the yard."

"Oh, Dadi, please let me come too! Please let me. I know thou wilt tell of Queen Sita. The babies are too small to under-

stand, but I do. Hearing about Sita Devi will make me a good girl. Indeed it will, Dadi."

"Every girl should learn from Sita, so as to serve her own lord as well as she served Sri Ram. So how canst thou want to stay idle while there is so much work to be done? Dost thou not remember how Sita the great queen worked in Valmiki's ashram? She fed the beasts and wove coarse garments, she sowed and reaped, cooked and swept and drew water—she who had been used to eat from gold and wear nothing but softest muslins and silks. That is what she did. And thou wouldst shirk working, with Elder Granddaughter-in-law having to pluck cucumbers and the younger one burdened with child?"

"Only a little while, Dadi, only a very little while. I shall not sit idle. Let me take out my spinning-wheel."

"How will the meal get ready by spinning?" Father's Mother tried to look stern but there was a twinkle in her eye. "Kunti, what goes with the chappatis to-day?"

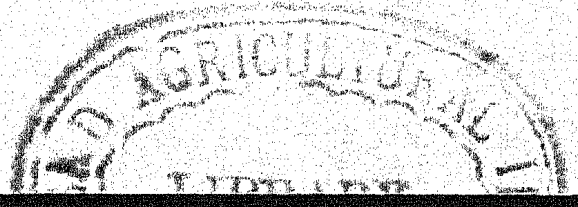
"We had brown sugar yesterday, and chutney the day before. So it will be onions to-day. I thought of mixing them with mint, if Younger Sister finds the time to do so."

"I certainly shall." Having finished the grinding, Dulari raised her head. She did not want slow working held against her, certainly not by Kunti.

"Shushila, ask Elder Sister for the onions and cut them into tiny pieces outside the yard door, so thou canst listen. Meanwhile the elder daughters can fetch our water. When they return thou goest in to help Dulari with the bread. Now come, all of you."

Five-year-old Shanti heaved Kunti's eldest on to her hip, as her own mother at times still did with her. Father's Mother took the baby from Kunti's breast with one hand, carrying her spinning-wheel in the other. Soon she was spinning in the sunny yard, the little ones playing and crawling round her.

Dulari cleaned the grinding-stones and dusted her hands.



After handing the onions to Shushila—a big one each for the males, a small one for each female—Kunti took rope and four iron buckets from the corner. She tossed two to Dulari. "Younger Sister, let us hurry."

Carrying two buckets each on their heads and two lengths of rope between them, the two girls left by the veranda. Crossing the street, they reached the neighbour's compound, there to be greeted by his three daughters-in-law who were just returning with full buckets from their well.

"Hast thou already heard?" They addressed only Kunti, Dulari still being counted as a foreigner of outlandish habits.

"No. What is it? Has the risaldar sahib brought you something from the bazaars in the town?" Kunti always envied these three girls the luxury of their father-in-law's home.

"No, we had news last night. *He* is coming back from the war!" A Hindu woman never mentions her husband directly.

"*He* too!" said the second daughter-in-law. The third, with her husband at home because he had been too young to serve, felt left out. Her two elder sisters boasted all the time about their fighting husbands and the riches they would bring home one day. Now that day was near, and they would become insufferable. It was bad luck to be number three and to have a husband not a hero! But perhaps there would be another war, when her lord would go, and the two others remain behind!

"When are they coming?"

"Father-in-law did not hear. But they are already sailing on the Black Waters. They bring many rupees, and gold and silver pinned to their chests, and every month the government across the Black Waters will send more rupees. I shall wear a silken skirt!"

"And I shall have a golden nose-ring!"

Kunti was speechless.

"I shall have a third son soon, if the gods and goddesses bless me." The third daughter-in-law had at last her triumph. One

of the elders had two girls, the other no child at all. If they had no sons soon, her own sons would lord it over them all one day!

Kunti recovered her wits. "We are very happy about the good news," she said politely, "but now we must take our leave. There is much work to be done this morning, and we cannot linger."

Soon she and Dulari were each tying a bucket to the rope, lowering it into the well, and hauling it up carefully inch by inch. The well was of masonry, about thirty feet deep. Hauling up her second bucket Dulari was breathing heavily, her muscles strained and aching. She must not let Kunti see how hard it was for her. She must not pant. Kunti might jeer at her or tell tales of her own efficiency, even when she was nine months gone. Steady. One inch, another. I mustn't spill precious water.

Feeling the child within her move with unusual strength, Dulari let go of the rope for a second, and caught it just in time to keep it from following the bucket that had fallen back into the water.

"Where are thy thoughts, Younger Sister? Thou must be more careful. Now all thy water is gone, and thou must start again. My buckets are full. But here I must stand and wait for thee, with all that work to do and Mother to scold me if the cucumbers are not gathered before noon! And still thou standest lazy."

Setting her teeth, Dulari began to draw, careful of her breathing, husbanding her strength. Involuntarily her breath fell into the rhythm of the song by which oxen draw water in Rajputana. She did not hum it aloud, but her whole being was filled with it.

Harya thane charaon re,
Haryani thare tain la-on re.

Green luscious grass to you I will give,
I will bring an excellent cow to be your wife.

Strengthened by tune and rhythm, Dulari hauled up her bucket steadily. Strange that a song sung for oxen should help her work, too. She did not care for grass or need a cow as wife. Yet the song gave her strength. To her its meaning was different. Sweet white milk to thee I will feed. Thou hast an excellent man for thy father, the best on earth. Another inch. Behold, my lord, thy son. O son, do thou help thy mother. Take no harm. Help her draw. Sweet white milk to thee I will feed. Another inch. One more. It was done.

Proudly Dulari lifted the heavy bucket to her head. Picking up the other she led the way home, wordlessly. Her heart was too full for words to come.

Emptying the buckets into big earthen jars, her thoughts already on the dough she had to mix and knead for chappatis, she heard Father's Mother speak in the courtyard: "And they were twins. Had they been born in their father's palace in Ajodhia, they would have lain on brocade upon gold and silks upon silver. As it was, they lay on the floor as we do or, later, in a bamboo cradle. With cotton they were covered as we are, with cotton that Sita the Queen had spun and woven with her own soft hands. There they lay, and their father did not know."

"Ram the King did not know, Dadi?"

"No, for long years to come he did not know that twin sons had been born to him, or that his queen and beloved was still among the living. In Valmiki's ashram the twins grew up—Love the eldest, and Kush the second-born."

"Love and Kush——"

"The King of Udaipur descends from Love. Therefore all other kings in Hindustan bow before him even to-day."

"Our thakur sahib too?"

"He and every other ruler in the land. They all descend from Kush, the second-born. However rich and mighty they may be, the ruler of Udaipur is greatest. Was his forefather not Sri Ram's first-born grandson?"

"Shall we one day travel to Udaipur to pay homage to the Great King?"

"Shalt thou now travel into the kitchen with thy onions? Look, Shushila, Younger Granddaughter-in-law is back and kneading the dough by herself. Shame upon thee! Thou wantest to become as good as Sita Devi? A she-demon thou art. Not even the mint is picked and crushed to mix with the onions!"

Father's Mother soon detected Dulari's paleness. "Has anything happened, Granddaughter? Art thou tired?"

"I am not tired, Dadi."

"Thou bundle of lies!"

"Indeed, I am not tired. Only—my child leaped high in me, Dadi, higher than ever before."

"Hast thou pains?"

"No, Dadi!"

"Dost thou not lie?"

"I speak the truth."

"See to the fire. I shall finish the kneading."

For a time both women worked in silence. Then Father's Mother let her keen glance rest on Dulari. "Thou spokest the truth. Thy time has not yet come. Now speak out what thou wantest to say. We are alone."

"My child—my first-born—— Mother's Auntie at home in Govindpur once said there was a spell for easy, healthy birth."

"So there is. Well do I remember thy mother's auntie, also thy mother—Sitapur girls both. I know the spell she meant, the one for easy birth."

"Dadi—wilt thou——"

"I will. When thy time is full I will do as thou askest."

"Dadi——"

"Now start with the chappatis lest the men go hungry. They have much work to do. Next year things will be better.

We shall have our own well. Everything will be easier then."

Our own well! Not to have to carry the buckets all that way. To have water near the house, water in plenty. And milk in plenty. Yes, things will be better. My son will live like a prince.

IV

THAKUR GANGA SINGH PUT DOWN HIS SON'S LETTER. IT HAD BEEN posted in Marseilles before Abhey Singh, after a pleasure trip to Paris and London, had embarked to join his regiment, the Imperial Corps of Lancers, in Port Said. At last all Indian units were returning after their exploits in Mesopotamia, Turkey, and Europe. Abhey Singh had done well, had added new glory to the ancient glory. The House of Badoli could be proud of him. The Military Cross was not bad for a young fellow of twenty-three. How the neighbours and relatives would envy him the boy's record! None of the four or five nephews who had joined up had decorations. The Raja of Tanalkot's three eldest boys had stayed at home, and the fourth had come down with scarlet fever or some other disreputable illness before he ever had been under fire. True, the cause of the war had been no inducement to take up arms. No Westerner was worth fighting for.

To Rajput princes descended from Ram in direct line the Westerners were no better than sweepers, however they might give themselves airs and stride about like peacocks. But though it was no honour to fight for or against Westerners, it was an honour to fight. Fighting was a man's only life, and how rarely could it be had nowadays! By going to war a Rajput could

show that he was still a Rajput, in spite of everything. Westerners or no Westerners, a war was a war.

The Thakur had been proud to send his second son to war—the first-born was needed at home for marriage and progeny to ensure the succession—and now he was proud to have his son return with a splendid fighting record. What feasts he would give for him! He must have a grand present, too. A superb hunter? Polo ponies? Not enough. A racing-car. A heavy gold cigarette-case. What a lot of money it would take, just now when he was scarcely beginning to recover from the expense of his eldest daughter's marriage. Surajkunwar had married the heir of Talawar, a state slightly bigger than Badoli. The Talawar jewels were famous throughout Rajputana, and Surajkunwar's dowry trinkets had had to match them. And the dowry, and the wedding feast, lasting fully three weeks! Two lakhs of rupees had not been enough to cover all the costs.

Well, the boy should not suffer because of that. New money had to be found. He would call the kamdar at once to devise some way or other. Damn these lazy rascals of peasants! As often as not they were dodging the taxes, and how miserably low were those taxes anyhow! Yet the tenants whined for remission. He would have to be more stern. Let them pay for having their second kunwar sahib return a hero!

The Thakur was about to have his kamdar called to him when he remembered his wife. The boy's mother should be the first to be told of his imminent return.

While he sat in her room waiting for her to join him, the furniture struck him as old-fashioned. All of it was handicraft, nothing of modern factory make. Hopelessly antiquated! He would have to see to that, too. There would be Abhey Singh's marriage as soon as it could be arranged. Soon it would be Nirmalkunwar's turn. She was fast growing into a young woman. With all these festivities pending, and the visits of

many princesses, modern furniture would look well. He would get the newest from Bombay, deep, upholstered armchairs in broad stripes of red and green, glass-topped tables, many modern lamps—the sort of thing he had seen when he had last visited the Raja of Tanalkot. How the devil did that fellow always manage to lay his hands on the latest fashion? Well, the Badoli thakur would outdo him. He would refurnish most of the place. But what of Khamraj Singh? He would complain if his own house were not modernized at the same time as his father's. This son and heir of his, with his whining wife behind him, had a way of making everything unpleasant. But with his second son coming back with the Military Cross he could play him off against the eldest.

"I am sorry to have kept you waiting." The Thakurani greeted her lord with folded hands. "I was praying."

"Praying for Abhey Singh's safe return, eh?"

The Thakur loved to tease his wife when he was alone with her. Their marriage had grown into real love on his side, and he had never taken a second wife, not even a concubine. Differing in this from most of his fellow rulers, he felt superior to them. There was no laxity of morals for him or his sons.

Fondly he gazed at his wife. Her fragile beauty had been almost untouched by the passing years. They were both impressive—he unusually strong and large, with an agility and a grace of carriage that betrayed the brilliant rider and sportsman, she with gemlike, finely chiselled features, huge, wistful eyes, ivorine complexion that put all her children's to shame, and exquisite movements that showed poise, dignity, and shyness all in one.

She drew her gold-bordered and spangled yellow veil closer round her shoulders. "Is it not time for him to return to us?"

"It is. I have heard from him this morning. He sends you his respects. He must be already in the Indian Ocean. Soon he will be with us. It can now be a matter of days only."

For a second the Thakurani, as white as parchment, put her hand to her heart. Then her blood began to flow again, and she blushed like a young girl. "Oh, what joy! So soon!"

"Have you missed him so much, Indrakunwar?"

"Does not every mother miss her child?"

"Well, now you will have him back. Don't spoil him too much. He will get his full share of spoiling, anyway."

"He should soon marry and have sons."

"Yes, we must see to that. There are many proposals for him already. Some are good. That Vithura girl! A lakh of rupees dowry, and plenty of jewels."

"The family is not as old as ours."

"Not many are. Then there is the only daughter of the Jawalar thakur. She has only sixty thousand rupees, but more than a lakh in jewels, and quite a bit of land adjoining ours. It will come to her after her mother's death."

"But there have been many low-class women in the Jawalar family. They always married far below themselves."

"Well, what family hasn't at some time or other? The land is good, with many good wells. Those tenants ought to pay much more taxes than ours."

The Thakurani inclined her head. "You are the master, of course. But should we not wait for some better proposal? I have watched Tejkunwar of Jawalar many a time. Though her skin is not dark, she is distinctly not attractive. Her temper seems to be bad, too. Abhey Singh would not be happy with her."

"How like a woman to talk like that! Is he not man enough to make her behave? A few sound beatings and her temper will be good, I swear. If we start to go by women's tempers——"

The Thakurani coughed slightly.

"You were always perfection, Indrakunwar—the best of wives. Those who are not must be trained to see reason."

"But what of our son? Would he be happy?"

"Of course he would! Why not? There are many things to make a marriage happy or unhappy. We must have the horoscopes compared, of course. I have a feeling that they will agree. The land is really excellent, and adjoining ours. I hear the Thakurani of Jawalar's health is not the best. Have you had any details lately?"

"It seems always the same. The twins' birth was too much for her, after the ten others that she bore."

"Very sad indeed. Do find out about the girl's health. It would be a marriage from which the state would benefit."

The Thakurani made no reply.

"We shall have some big dinners on Abhey's return. After that there will be his wedding. Let me know all that is wanted. We shall show the world how proud we are of him."

The Thakur rose and turned to the window that looked out on to the quadrangle of the palace. "Those two small houses must go. They spoil the symmetry. We shall have to lay out another hard court."

Blue and green parakeets fluttered in and out of the palace windows. Jasmine and wild roses sent their fragrance from the garden into the room. Outside the guards were changing.

"Now to work!" said the Thakur. "A son coming back with the Military Cross deserves that we do our best."

Just at this hour a young officer sat in his cabin aboard a ship that sailed the Indian Ocean towards Bombay. Before him in a silver frame was the photograph of a fair girl with close-cropped hair. He caressed the face beneath the glass, then he turned the picture to the wall and dropped his head between his hands, tears in his eyes.

V

THERE WAS THE TANK, AND, BEYOND IT, THE VERY TREES THAT SHE had heard about all her childhood. Mother had spoken the exact truth. If anything she had not praised this enchanted place enough. That there could be so much water! Until to-day Dulari had always pictured water in small quantities familiar to her: the Govindpur village pond, a muddy brew that served alike as laundry, bathing-place for cattle and human, and drinking water, becoming less and less liquid as the hot season approached; wells that gave out even before the peak of the season; and the precious water hauled up in buckets and stored away in jars. There was, of course, the sacred river, Mother Ganges, with its ever-flowing water that gave life and health and purified whatever it touched. And transcending even the sacred river was the unbounded water element that served the god Varuna, he who had two oceans for his loins and yet was present in every tiny water drop. But that was in heaven, as the River Ganges was the heaven of Hindustan. This plenitude had nothing to do with the bucketfuls of water in ordinary life, where every drop had to be toiled for. This was what Dulari had believed until now.

To-day she was learning otherwise. Look at that brimming tank! Why, the water was actually talking! In effortless grace it was swaying hither and thither as the breeze was telling it to do. It was as though it breathed in tune with wind and sun. Suddenly Dulari remembered chants she heard as a child. "May the strong-flowing sap of the honey-dripping waters come to me, together with life's breath!" Now she could understand the meaning of these words. Honey-dripping! Yes, with the sun full on them the waters of the tank were golden-coloured.

"Why dost thou stand still, Granddaughter? To the goddess it is that we go to pray, not to Varuna, the lord of the waters."

"Forgive, Dadi. Never before have I seen such floods."

"Aye, they are a sight for eyes that go sore from beholding drought and misery and starvation."

"My mother has told me about this tank many a time."

"Often she came here as a girl. The tank is a friend to maidens and women alike. Soon thou, too, wilt enter it to bathe after thy happy delivery."

If only she could be sure that the delivery would be a happy one! Five days ago there would have been nothing but happiness in her. Now her anxiety marred her joy. Since the child had leaped high within her at the well, her days and nights had been full of fear of miscarriage, fear of a prematurely born and sickly child. How Kunti would rejoice if anything went wrong!

Dulari felt a stranger in Sitapur. In grief one cries for home, and here she was cut off from her own people, all alone. But now she felt better, seeing the tank in all its beauty. Perhaps she ought to tell Father's Mother, who knew so much. She might help to prevent miscarriage.

"A great day it is for a woman, Granddaughter, to purify herself in these waters after the pollution that birth brings."

Yes, a great day, to feel the breathing of these waters and breathe with them, play with them, all secure in the knowledge that at home there was the child waiting for her, ready to suckle, that the time of expectation and anxiety was over. And not only the child waiting. After a separation of forty days to be reunited with her lord, to know that after the bath she was pure, that she would dress for him and wear jasmine in her hair, that at last they would be together again——

"Here is the shrine, Granddaughter. Hast thou the coconut full of sweet milk, just as thy womb is full of new life?"

"I have it here, Dadi."

"Put it before the goddess' feet. Keep the jasmine garland for later."

Dulari did as she was bidden. Then she bowed with folded hands to Lakshmi, goddess of prosperity, whose brightly painted statue stood before her.

Father's Mother bowed down three times. "Hear me, O Lakshmi, thou giver of blessings, thou helper of women that pray to thee! Look down on her that is with child. Her time is near. Help her to birth when ten moons have come and gone. Let not her child be born before its time. As this great earth conceives the germs of life, thus shall her child be fastened to her womb. As this great earth holds flower, bush, and tree, thus shall her child be fastened to her womb. As this great earth holds mountains, peaks, and hills, thus shall her child be fastened to her womb. As this great earth holds species of each kind, thus shall her child be fastened to her womb."

Dulari held her breath. Father's Mother knew everything. Without needing to be told, without telling Dulari that she knew, she had shared her fears, and now prayed to the great goddess to prevent miscarriage. A wave of tenderness and gratitude swept through Dulari's heart.

"Garland the goddess, Granddaughter. Yes, like that."

The old woman again bowed down three times. Then her words rang out as solemnly as before.

"The evil powers keep away from her, great goddess. From danger wrought by demons shield her. Let not the evil ones take an old life within the house because a new is born. Her child shall bring prosperity, not death. To darkness uttermost let demons go who try to interfere. Restrain them. Give her prosperity, bless her with wheat and barley, honey, ghi and milk, with cattle and with horse. As in the furrow seed grows up to life, so let her offspring root and rise and live. O goddess, bless this woman and her child."

"Dadi—how didst thou know?" asked Dulari as they turned homeward.

"Have I been born to-day? How did I know? How should I not know, rather!"

"Will my child——"

"What of thy child? Thou hast still more than two moons to go. Rather think of thy work. Thy thread is not even. Thou must do better at the spinning-wheel. Let me see thy weaving, too. We shall soon have Koshaliya's wedding upon us."

As the two women were nearing Hanuman's shrine and their own fields the gay sound of drums and clarinets reached their ear. Turning into their own lane they saw a small procession heading towards the risaldar's compound. Somebody was riding the pony, while another was mounted on the spindly horse that belonged to Mohan Lal, the moneylender.

"It must be the two sons back from the war. Hurry, Granddaughter. Let us leave the lane and cut across the fields. For a woman seven months gone it is unseemly to be seen by men. No man will stay at home to-night! All my sons and grandsons will be across the lane to feast. Well, let them. Men like men."

"Dadi——" Dulari stood still. How to tell Father's Mother that the load had been lifted from her? Her heart was full of gratitude but she could find no words.

"What is it, Granddaughter?"

"I—I shall twist my thread well."

"So thou wilt, Granddaughter," said the old woman with a twinkle.

VI

IT WAS FATHER'S TURN TO FEAST THE HEROES. EVERY JAT AND RAJPUT house in the village was clamouring for their presence to do them honour, but Father, by right of neighbourliness and

friendship, came first. The women of the house had worked all day and part of the previous night to get the festive meal ready. There were pulse and vegetable curry as main dishes, curd heavy with cucumber, and plenty of green chillies. For bread there were chappatis and balls of dough fried in burning ashes. There was wheat gruel with brown sugar for a sweet. There would even have been one or two dishes more, had not Father's Mother frightened them all with her heavy breathing just after noon, when the brunt of the cooking was to have started. Mother had made her rest in the courtyard, had gently rubbed her feet with mustard oil and sent Shushila for some jasmine flowers. After carefully picking them over, throwing out even slightly bruised petals, she put the jasmine with water into a tiny jar, the only glass jar the house held. This was placed in the centre of the yard where the sun could shine on it. The petals thus became filled with the strength of the sun, and would carry its radiance as medicine into Dadi's old heart.

Kunti, Dulari, Koshaliya, and Lajja had gone on with preparations for the meal. At Mother's bidding they had rinsed the clean earthen food-bowls once more, and carried them into the sun.

Everything turned out to satisfaction. The food was good, the guests pleased. Rameshwar and Vikram ably helped Father serve his guests, and Father's Mother had recovered and her breathing was as quiet as usual. Now the men sat on the veranda, passing the hookah from hand to hand, while the women crowded in the room behind so as not to lose a word of the tales of strange deeds across the Black Waters. The neighbour's wife and daughters-in-law were presiding, full of pride. It was not every woman's fate to have heroes for sons or husbands.

"Look at my bangles! Silver washed with real gold!" In the semi-darkness the eldest daughter-in-law let Kunti feel the size and diameter.

"Look at my earrings! Golden they are with blue stones!"

"And their pockets are full of money! I shall have my silken skirt on next bazaar day!"

"I shall get mine from Jaipur, and a silken veil with a golden border."

"Enough," said their mother-in-law with authority. Though she enjoyed the boasting as a token of her family's social superiority, she must keep her daughters-in-law from talking in the presence of elders. "Stop your chatter. Listen to your husbands' tales as proper wives should."

"What is now thy rank, Lachchmaniya?" asked Hamira's eldest of the friend of his childhood. "How wast thou called in the service?"

"Dafadar—sergeant-major—I am. That is a great thing. I was in charge of men and horses alike. My horses were the best-trained in the regiment."

"And Sohnya?"

"He is a corporal." The sergeant-major pointed to his younger brother. "But the infantry do not know of horses. On foot they march, as we do here."

Inside the room the corporal's young wife hung her head, while her luckier sister-in-law could not restrain little proud noises.

"Also the infantry has its use," said the risaldar. A flame of remembrance kindled in his eyes. "I remember one day on the north-west frontier when they did very well."

"But thou wast in the cavalry, Father. What is a man without a horse?"

This was to the father's heart but, being a fair-minded and courteous man, he did not want his younger son to stand in the shadow. "Aye, it is good for a man to feel a horse between his legs. But often the infantry have to face graver danger. Hast thou not found this, Younger Son?"

Thus called upon to speak, the corporal was quick to take his chance. Usually his elder brother was made the centre of attention. "Thou sayest right, Father. Many are the times I stood in danger of death."

"But thou wast saved!"

"Do tell us about it."

"When was the danger greatest?"

"Well, it was in France at a place called something like 'Path of Women,' though I never saw any women there—and a wonder too, for there are women everywhere across the Black Waters. There was an attack, and right and left of me men fell. Then I saw a bullet heading straight for me. I did not duck or side-step—there was no time for it. I just looked at that bullet coming for me, and from my mouth came the words 'Praise be to God.' At once the bullet swerved, leaving me unhurt though I still stood in its way. God is great."

"God is great!" echoed the men and women under their breath.

"With God's help and a good horse under him a good man can do much," took up the elder son. "One day the colonel sahib sent for me and said: "Lachchmaniya, I know you are a brave and reliable man. I want you to reconnoitre and find out a good place where the battalion can spend the night.' So I took with me Ramlia, he who hails from Gokulpur and had his arm shot off later on. After going some distance we saw an enemy patrol, and I ordered Ramlia to fix his bayonet, and we charged, shouting, 'Praise be to Great God.' We killed them all, about forty men, Ramlia and I. He ten, I thirty. Not one even so much as asked for water! Dead they were as the demons after the battle of Lanka. And Ramlia and I laughed and were pleased. Soon we returned after having found a good place for the battalion. The colonel sahib was very pleased with me. He patted me on the back and said that I was as a son to him and also that I was the bravest man in the whole regiment.

After that I was made sergeant-major and everybody had to obey my command."

"Thou art indeed a great warrior."

"We are all proud of thee." The patel's opinion carried much weight.

Vikram could not take his eyes from the medals pinned to the hero's chest. What luck that fellow had! Being rewarded and praised not for doing difficult work but for the most pleasurable job imaginable. A weapon, a horse, riding against the enemy, killing him! Why, there was nothing better in the world! Lachchmaniya should praise the colonel sahib for allowing him to fight, not the other way round. Vikram thought of the sword and pony of his wedding, and how he had had to return the borrowed glory a bare forty-eight hours later. A man was meant to fight. Hadn't he brought down all the wooden birds in a single stroke? Let him have a sword and a horse, and given but a chance, he could outdo Lachchmaniya. He would be made a colonel sahib himself. What a pity that the war was over—except that there was Dulari. It would be hard to leave her. She was not like Lachchmaniya's wife with her dark skin and shrill voice. No wonder he had been glad to go.

"Thy colonel sahib must be a very great man."

"So he is. Many a time could he have been a brigadier or more but he said to the government in London, where all great generals come from, that he wanted to stay as our colonel, because we were the best regiment in the world."

"And thou the best man in it, so thy colonel sahib said!"

Even good manners could not prevent the sergeant-major from agreeing. Inside the room his wife looked round triumphantly.

"Did you two encounter our second kunwar sahib over there?" asked the patel. "I hear he is back in Badoli. Our thakur sahib will give many feasts for him."

"Abhey Singh? Indeed I met him. He came to visit us with

the colonel of the Imperial Lancers, which is his regiment. He talked to me and asked me where I came from, and I said Sitapur. He shook my hand, and he and I chatted as friends. To my regiment I said: 'This is Kunwar Abhey Singh, the second son of my thakur sahib.' And they had a good look at him and said he was a smart fellow. So I was proud of my kunwar sahib."

"If thou art his friend as much as all that why dost thou not ask him to reduce our taxes? They are far too high."

"They may be even higher soon. From a Gokulpur man who was in town last week I heard that the kamdar is setting out on a round of villages for more taxes."

"He always travels from place to place before harvest-time. That needn't mean new taxes."

"Let us not talk of taxes. We shall know soon enough."

"Are the villages across the Black Waters like ours?"

"Indeed they are not." The corporal came suddenly to life. "In the whole of France you would not find a single village like ours. There even the smallest house is of brick or stone. The poorest man has his own house, and the houses have many rooms. Even for cooking they have a separate room, and the cattle have their own house called a stable. Then there is again a special house for plough and cart."

"How rich they must be!"

"It sounds like our thakur's palace!"

"Peasants like us living in such greatness?"

"Peasants who till the soil like us?"

"Aye, peasants like us. Their farming much differs from ours, though. Horses draw their plough, not oxen. And their worry is too much water. Often their crops fail because the sun cannot shine for days on end. We pray for rain and they for sunshine."

"Can you imagine it! Too much rain! How happy they must be!"

"If their crops fail they cannot be happy even if their soil is wet," Hamira said. "Perhaps they too have not enough food."

The corporal looked at the sergeant-major. "Elder Brother, didst thou ever see peasants in France who did not have enough food? I didn't."

"Nor did I. They have three good meals every day."

"Three good meals!"

"And if you visit them in the afternoon there is a fourth meal of bread and cheese and wine."

"But their food is not half as good as ours! Utterly tasteless it is, without any chillies or curry."

"And they have no proper bread. Sop for babies I call it, all white. Can you imagine people in their senses preparing their bread from wheat alone? How can a man get strength to work on bread like that?"

"How foolish people in the West must be!"

"In many things they are. And so dirty! Would you believe that before or after eating they do not wash their hands or rinse their mouths!"

"How can that be? Did nobody ever teach them cleanliness?"

"Not all Westerners are so. My colonel sahib always washes. And they have a strange code according to which they eat. They sit round a high table and eat from very small delicate plates all made from fine glass. Instead of using their fingers as we do, they use small silver spoons and knives and forks, something like the pitchfork we use at harvest."

"No wonder they need all this if their fingers are too dirty to eat with!"

"They do things still stranger. Women sit at the same table as men and eat the same food. Even do they eat before their husbands."

"No, that cannot be true! Thou wantest to fool us, Lachchmaniya!"

"Younger Brother, tell them whether I speak the truth or not."

The corporal looked around with a twinkle in his eyes. "Of course Elder Brother speaks the truth. But that is just nothing! Women talk freely with me. They have not the slightest sense of modesty. With head uncovered they appear in the presence of their husbands. Brazenly they look at them."

"They look at their husbands?"

"Aye, husbands or strangers, just as it comes."

"Have they no sense of shame?"

"And what are their men about, letting them behave like that? Are there across the Black Waters no sticks or shoes to beat women with?"

"Or has mere wheat bread made them into weaklings? Can they no more master their own womenfolk?"

Inside the room the women giggled and pitied their Western sisters. How terrible it must be to be married to men who lacked manliness!

"But very beautiful their women are," concluded the sergeant-major wistfully.

"How dost thou know?"

"How do I know? They are there for everybody to behold. Didn't I say that they talk to any man?"

"Hast thou really talked to a married woman?"

"How can one know over there whether a woman is married or not? There is no vermilion in the parting of her hair, there may even not be a parting at all. Curls they call their hairdress. It's fuzziness all over, like a yellow or brown cotton-wool. They do not even oil their hair! Also they do not wear toe-rings. As a matter of fact, you never see their toes. They uncover face and head, but they cover their feet. So how can you tell whether they are married?"

"You really can't," emphasized the corporal. "Let me tell you a strange happening that befell me. It was night and I had

entered a peasant's house after three days' fighting. They made me sit down. The woman of the place took off my boots and my socks and puttees and brought a bucket full of hot water for me to put my feet in. She even stood there when I took off my clothes and handed me some of her husband's to wear. She washed and pressed my clothes, she cleaned and greased my boots, she did everything which she ought to have done for none else except her own husband."

"The bitch!"

"Have they no shame?"

"Did her husband not kill her when he came to know?"

"Kill her? All the time while she did these things for me there was her husband sitting in a chair near the fire, smoking his pipe and saying not a word!"

"He did not stop her?"

"On the contrary. When she handed me his clothes he motioned her to bring a warmer shirt than at first she had."

"Allowing one's wife to serve another man without killing her at once?"

"Perhaps he was mad!"

"Or a eunuch who wouldn't mind."

"No, they had eight children all right."

"How can a man stand it?"

"Has he no blood in his veins——"

"Tell us, Lachchmaniya, is everybody crazy across the Black Waters?"

"No, not everybody is crazy over there. They do very clever things, like a thing called a telephone by which you can speak from one place of the earth to another even without being there. But where women are concerned they are crazy. Many women do such things which to us seem shameless, but to them appear even as good actions. There are hospitals for the wounded and sick. Would you believe that women do the nursing there? Women, unmarried or married, who never ought to set eyes on

any man except their own, there they are serving, undressing, washing, and feeding strange men, even doing sweepers' work for them. Can you believe it? "

"But what can be their reason for such craziness? "

The sergeant-major gazed into space. "I puzzled about the reason, but I couldn't find any. At last I asked Abhey Singh Sahib when he came to visit our regiment. I said: 'Kunwar Sahib, you can help us. We are too ignorant to understand life here. In Rajputana life is so different. You come from there as we do, but you have been to many schools and your wisdom is greater than ours. Why do the women here do nursing and cleaning for us who are not their husbands? Why do they trouble? What can be their reason? ' "

"What did the Kunwar sahib reply? "

"Did he say it was Western magic? "

"He said something still stranger. 'They may do it out of kindness,' he said."

"Kindness? For a woman to serve her husband is duty. To serve strangers is sin. What has kindness to do with it? "

"That is what our kunwar sahib said to me."

"They must be crazy after all," concluded the patel. "Kindness indeed! The women are bitches because their men are weaklings. Poor women! Maybe they are so desperate with no proper men about that they start doing shameless things."

Praise be to the gods that this was Hindustan.

VII

ELDER UNCLE STRODE ABOUT WITH SATISFACTION. "NOT ONLY ten or eleven! We may have even seventeen or eighteen rupees over for our well. Look at the millets! Even some of the

outside fields bear well. Permatma has this time preserved us grain in plenty."

"Praise be to all gods and goddesses that protect us from evil demons!" Father never forgot gratitude where it was due. "We have been blessed with their blessing. Since childhood days I cannot remember having seen ears of corn like these. They fairly burst with sap and strength."

"At last we seem to have some luck. Did not the water-diviners say that near our houses they hear water surging in three, nay, four places? They will strike water at once."

"To-morrow we start harvesting. And when we have finished——"

"We dig the well."

The well! Rameshwar, Vikram, and the uncle's sons were as excited as their elders. It was after working hours, but dusk had not yet set in. The men of the family were walking from field to field, taking stock of each and all. Within the house the women were preparing special dishes to celebrate the beginning of harvest-time. "This is not only autumn harvest like any other year," Father's Mother had said meaningly, "it is also the beginning of a new life for the family. At last we shall have a well of our own. Prepare two dishes more than for the night before harvest, Daughter."

Among singing and merriment Mother had set daughters and daughters-in-law to work. Even the smallest children felt that this was a festival different from any other. "Our well," chanted Baby Shanti, running excitedly through house and yard. "Other people's well gives water. Ours will give also sugar. Sweet brown sugar it will give."

Sweet brown sugar. Sweet white milk. Dulari, drawing her blue veil, printed by her mother with a design of black leaves, closer round her body, sighed with well-being. It was good to be alive. Thanks to the great goddess and Dadi's invocation, she had had no miscarriage. No longer was she allowed to draw

water. Now it was mid-December. In the beginning of February her son would be born. The well would give water long before then.

"They are coming?" Little Kispu had been posted outside the house to warn the women of the men's return from the fields.

"Is everything ready?" Mother glanced round like a general before the battle.

Kispu came running back to the yard door. "The village watchman had just joined them. They all stand still. He talks. Now Father is shaking his head. Elder Uncle seems angry. Now the watchman leaves them. He goes to the Rajputs. They still talk. Why don't they come? My belly shouts for food."

Why don't they come? Would the meal have to wait much longer? The women craned their necks to see what was going on.

"Here they are! How slowly they walk!"

"There is something wrong, Daughter." Father's Mother spoke with authority. "That watchman must have brought bad news."

"Men's news is often bad, Mother-in-law. Women work, and prepare, and try their best. Then men burst in with some news or other, and everything is upside down. Let us hope it is not so to-day."

"Our good meal!"

"To-morrow is harvest!"

"Our well!"

So many lovely things all at once! The children were reassured. There couldn't be much wrong with all these prospects before them.

When the men had washed and squatted down on the veranda Father's Mother went out and sat down among them. "What is wrong, Eldest Son?"

"Wrong? There is nothing wrong, Mother. The watchman bid us go to the panchayat-tree to-night. The kamdar has arrived and wants to speak to all the village. So we have to set out after we have our food."

"Does not the kamdar go from man to man each harvest-time, looking at their crops and taxing them? Why must they assemble to-night?"

"The watchman says the kamdar wants to tell us about the second kunwar sahib's feats in the war, he about whom Lachchmaniya spoke the other night. That does not sound too bad."

"No." Father's Mother kept her doubts to herself. No gloom should be cast over the meal. Soon enough they would know what new devilry the kamdar was up to. Why did not the Thakur sahib come himself, so that they could tell him their grievances? His father and grandfather had done so. Often had they remitted taxes on the spot, if a man could catch their ear and fancy. Kamdars could not remit of their own volition, even had they wanted to. It was much better to have the master himself to face and deal with. But the present ruler did not come, most likely because he was afraid his subjects would approach him for clemency. Kings, the descendants of Sri Ram, to behave like that!

She sighed. Like a stone her heart lay in her breast.

Father's mind, too, was heavy. If the kamdar was asking for some new tax, there might be much less money for the well. As though the ordinary taxes were not high enough!

Passing the shrine of Hanuman with his brothers and his two eldest sons, he was struck anew by the neglect of the Rajput fields. Most of them lay fallow, and those which showed some straggly crops were even more desolate. How could a man let his land go to waste? How could he rise each day and go to sleep, how could he eat and drink and talk and breathe if he had on his conscience the neglect of the soil? With every further step the sight seemed to grow drearier, the air heavier. Mother

was right. The very earth cried out for care and water. It was unbearable to hear this outcry and not answer. The soil is helpless, and man must care for it. There is no greater crime than to let earth starve.

Involuntarily Father drew to the left so as to be nearer Hamira's fields even by a pace or two. This was the same soil as that of the lazy Rajput dogs, but each of Hamira's fields was resplendent with the bounty of its crops. The very air was full of plenty and contentment. Only a narrow lane separated the compounds. Yet they were two worlds apart, the good and the bad.

Father drew himself up. He knew where his duty lay. Let his land go to waste, let the desert encroach upon it more and more, have the outcry of his fields in his ears day in and day out? No. The kamdar might do his worst, but the well would be dug. Man could shoulder a lot. He could toil till his back broke, he could face loss and plagues, he could see his children starve. But the soil must not starve. Earth was sacred. Prajapati, the Lord of All Creation, had entrusted it to man.

With mighty steps Father strode on, like a warrior going to battle. Come what may, he would see that his soil received its due.

Vikram was looking forward to the meeting. It was his first. No man could attend the village assembly before being a fully-fledged member of the family council. He could not hear what the panchayat had to say, nor could he be present at the reception of distinguished visitors. Now at last he belonged. Marriage brought not only well-being and pleasure beyond any he had ever imagined, it also brought honour and recognition. Soon he would even be a father, the father of a son. He was certain that Dulari would bear him a son. Then he would truly command everybody's respect. A son made all the difference. True, it was the woman's fault if a man did not have a son, if

there was not his own flesh and blood to perform the last rites for him when he lay on his funeral pyre. No blame could attach to the man, yet only if he had sons was he considered complete. Well, there were only two more moons! Dulari would do her duty.

Now they were passing the temple, in whose shade stood the pilgrims' rest-house. What a convenient life these pilgrims led, going from village to village and being well fed! But he did not envy them. Tilling the ground or, better still, fighting the enemy was a man's real job, not praying and doing nothing else except eating well. Yet these pilgrims were saintly people, and it was wrong to think poorly of them. In their superior knowledge they might curse you, might lay a spell on your cattle or fields, even on your wife and children. It was better to stand on good terms with them and feed them too. Vikram glanced at the rest-house, where under the arches of the veranda some naked ash-smeared figures were squatting. To-morrow he would bring them two pounds of gram or a coconut, and ask for their blessing on his wife and his son-to-be.

They crossed the main street, Father still leading in great strides. From everywhere men were bound for the patel's compound. This crowd of Jats and Rajputs, with a few Muslims among them, was the village. Only they were admitted to such important gatherings as to-day's, at which the kamdar was to tell them about their kunwar sahib's exploits. Vikram pictured the kunwar sahib on a charger, riding like the wind with sword drawn against the enemy.

Now they had reached the meeting-place. On a platform in front of the panchayat-tree were the members of the panchayat, while Father and his clan sat on the ground among the other Jats. It was a pleasant spot. The patel's huge neem-trees protected it from the scorching sun in summer-time. Now, in December, they seemed to hold off the cold. There was the slightest breeze from the south-east, bringing with it the

fragrance of the patel's well-watered, well-tended fields. There he was, talking to the kamdar. How grand the envoy looked with his quilted vest, bright green with pink piping over a white shirt and pyjamas! Looking at him, you realized what whiteness was. All the men wore white home-spun cotton, but it seemed always grey or brownish. The kamdar's white tunic and trousers looked as though they had come straight from the cotton-bush. And that gay, quilted vest! Only the risaldar, the moneylenders, and the patel had such warm garments. What must it feel like to be so well-to-do? Vikram wondered what the patel might have fed the kamdar for his evening meal. How many kinds of pulse and bread? There might have been liquor, too. Both men looked thoroughly satisfied and contented. Well, the meal couldn't have equalled his own wedding feast by a long way. Even at the Thakur's palace they could not fare any better. He wouldn't mind enumerating to the man in the quilted vest the number of dishes they had then been served! Perhaps that would show him whom he had to deal with. Sitapur was not an ordinary village.

Here was the priest, joining kamdar and patel. So far Vikram had not any direct dealings with the village Brahman, that dispenser of wisdom and knowledge. For almost the first time he now looked at him attentively. This was the man to whom he would go for his first-born's horoscope and for those of all sons and daughters to come. Would he live all that time? Even now the priest did not look young. Well, no need to worry. One Brahman gone, a dozen others were ready to take his place.

The patel had risen. In lengthy words he was praising the village's devotion to its ruler and the dynasty. How long would he go on? Did he talk like that at every meeting? It was the royal envoy Vikram wanted to hear, not their own patel!

At last. Here was the kamdar. With his piercing voice, his bloodshot eyes over enormous greying moustaches, and the elegance of his appearance, he dominated his audience at once.

"Men of Sitapur, I am glad to be among you, the bringer of great news that will gladden your hearts and make them swell with pride. Our sirdar, the noble Thakur Ganga Singh, has himself sent me so that his joy should be yours. He does not want to keep it to himself or to his capital. No, in the unbounded generosity of his mind he wants all his subjects to partake of his joy. To all his villages the sirdar has sent me with the glad tidings, first and foremost to Sitapur. It is the village most dear to his heart because of its unflagging loyalty and good will. As you, the men of Sitapur, are devoted to our ruler, he, the great descendant of Sri Ram, he whose ancestors have governed ours for more thousands of years than people outside Rajistan with their short and undistinguished past can conceive, is devoted to you with paternal love. His care and generosity are with you always. Sleepless nights he spends, concerned with your welfare only, denying himself well-earned rest for the sake of you all. Happy the subjects who live under such a ruler. Our noble sirdaron ki jai! Hail our ruler and his family!"

"Ki jai!" The men were stirred as always when loyalty was involved. Were not kings the representatives of the gods?

Vikram could hardly keep still. He wanted to shout, to act, not to remain sitting among all others. A new world had opened before his eyes. Not until a few moments ago had he ever realized the closeness of the link that bound him to the sirdar. Until now the Thakur sahib had been to him the king who held all power, the ruler who governed in magnificence from his capital, who lived in many palaces and ate from sheer gold, whose jewels outshone all others and whose horses were the fastest in the world. He was more remote than heaven. To the gods you could pray, and their statues stood in shrines and alcoves. But the Thakur sahib you never saw. Taxes had to go to him all the year round. Whenever the family had needed something for the fields or for themselves, they could not have

it because of taxes. Though the collector came for them, they went to the capital, into the sirdar's palace. That was all Vikram had ever known of his ruler.

Now with awe and reverence he had heard that he and his, too, had a place in their king's life. He loved them with paternal love. He wanted to share his joys with them, sending his kamdar all the way for no other purpose. Their worries he took on his royal shoulders, he who could have chosen to feast day in and day out, he who could hunt and fight and reign to his heart's content. He did not feel above worrying about poor people like themselves. What generosity, what greatness! It was like Sri Ram's reign all over again. And it was their own Sitapur, it was Father and uncles, Rameshwar and himself with all the other people of the village whom the great king liked before all! The kamdar had just said so. He must tell Dulari so she should see how exalted was this place to which he had brought her. If only he could do something in return for so much goodness! If only he could serve the sirdar with a sword! But here was the kamdar talking again.

"Aye, you do well to show your gratitude, men of Sitapur. For you would miss much, had not the sirdar in his fatherly kindness sent me to you. You would have missed the gladdest tidings that have come your way for a long time. Now listen well. Here is my message."

Expectantly the men looked up. All coughing stopped as if by magic.

"Our state has been singled out among all others. An honour has been bestowed on Badoli that makes it shine forth like the most precious gem in all Rajistan. As in the days of our ancestors it is Badoli that leads, Badoli to which the other rulers are looking with admiration."

There was approval on the men's faces. To be the leading state in Rajistan!

"To whom do you owe this great honour? Could you have

won it for yourselves? And if the village of Sitapur could not have done so, could those fools of Gokulpur or Govindpur have managed? No. None of the villages, none of the peasants could have won such honour and such glory for the state of Badoli. You owe it to the sirdar himself. In his wisdom he sent out the second kunwar sahib to fight the enemy across the Black Waters. Many thousands, many times many thousands of sons were sent to fight likewise. From peasants' homes they came and also from palaces, so that the peasants' sons might serve under their own leaders. Among all of them, among all the courageous princes who fought the great war across the Black Waters, there was none to equal the one Badoli sent forth. Our kunwar sahib outdid all other princes, those who had come from east and west, from north and south of the earth. So masterly did he lead his men, so brave was he in battle, so many enemies did he slay that the ruler across the Black Waters who is greater even than the Viceroy felt in duty bound to bow to the excellence of our kunwar sahib and bestow on him the highest decoration they have to give in England. The fame of our state resounds throughout the world. A hero beyond comparison our kunwar sahib returns to us. He has made Badoli and all Rajistan famous once again."

"Kunwar Sahib Abhey Singh ki jai!" shouted the men now of their own accord. The sergeant-major and the corporal were only kept by the greater wisdom of their father from proclaiming that the highest war decoration was the Victoria Cross, which the Kunwar sahib had by no means received. Nobody shouted louder than Vikram. It was like the *Ramayana*! The deeds of Sri Ram and his clan were revived in present days by their own kunwar sahib. If only he could serve under him! If only—but there was Dulari, his wife, and his son-to-be. Father and Mother. The land. Soon there would be the well, too. No, he could not go.

"Yes. Rejoice over our hero's safe return. Everybody in the

state who knows the glad tidings is filled with joy. So is the sirdar. What pride for a father's heart to see his beloved son honoured above all! "

" I wouldn't mind him for a son! "

" He belongs to all of us! "

" We are his fathers and brothers! "

The kamdar looked round. What cheek these Jat fellows had! Jat dogs the fathers of a Rajput prince, indeed! Damn their impudence. Time something was done to curb them. Meanwhile there was no harm in playing on their present mood. It would ease his task.

" These feelings of loyalty and affection do you credit, men of Sitapur. Yes, the hero of Badoli belongs to the whole state. All of you are his fathers, his brothers. All of you can help his own father, the sirdar, to celebrate his safe return."

" That we shall! "

" We shall bring the gods many offerings! "

" We shall erect a shrine! " It would mean expense and work, but they would not stint their kunwar sahib.

What fools they were! The kamdar, in his Rajput contempt for Jats, nearly gave himself away. Offerings! A shrine! They would not get away as easy as that. Money they would have to give, good money, and the sooner they knew it, the better. He was fed up with beating about the bush. Was he to waste at each village so much time and attention to cater to their confounded feelings? But the Thakur had insisted. " Rouse their feelings," he had said before sending the kamdar off on his tour, " and they will be willing to give. After all, it is not every day that their kunwar sahib returns a hero. If you don't bring back ten thousand rupees I shall know that you have bungled the job in sheer inefficiency. I know my Jats. Their reliability is like a rock. If they are properly approached and moved they will be glad to pay. Tell them how I have not the means to get Abhey Singh properly feasted, let alone to get him betrothed.

That will touch them. They hold with early marriage. If you do your job well you can bring out of them even more than ten thousand. If not I shall hold you responsible." It was easy for the sirdar to advise gentle methods. He sat in his palace and had not to deal with these lazy rascals, who shirked paying where they could. All the money went to the palace, and all the disagreeable work was his, the kamdar's. As though he had not children of his own to provide for! Well, this time he would take off for himself a higher percentage than usual. He deserved it after having had to coddle these Jat dogs instead of kicking them, as was their due. Let them now have the pill after all the damned sugar-coating.

"Men of Sitapur, not only will you thank the gods as you think best, but you will also have the privilege and honour to join in all other celebrations. Although you are far away from the capital, you will be represented at all festivities. Without your help and devotion they could not take place. The sirdar counts on you. Let your village send its share to defray expenses. With Sitapur to lead, all other villages will follow."

"How can poor people like us help the capital? There they are rich with two or three meals a day for everybody."

"And good cloth instead of rags to wear!"

"And quilted coats against the cold!"

"Such talk is neither here nor there. The sirdar wants money from us."

"Wants money!" An angry red flushed the kamdar's face. "The sirdar does not want. He orders. His subjects have to obey his commands."

"So it is an order?" Was it Elder Uncle's voice or Father's? Vikram was bewildered by the sudden change of atmosphere.

"No, it isn't." The kamdar realized that he had gone too far. Better rouse again their feelings of loyalty. But he made a mental note to ask the patel about the last speaker. He remembered where the fellow's fields were, but the name had slipped

his memory. Who could remember all these cursed Jats? "It is of your own free will that you will help the sirdar, your great father, to celebrate the return of his son. Were he not so kind and generous to the peasant there would be no need to ask for any contributions. If he extorted from his subjects the sums that other rulers do, he would have riches untold. He could buy for his own whatever is needed, and to spare. But he always puts the peasant first. The taxes you are asked to pay are negligible compared to those in neighbour states. It is because of this generosity of his that the sirdar is not able to defray the expenses of the moment. From all Rajistan visitors are expected. They want to pay their tribute to the hero of Badoli. But there is no money to entertain them properly. As loyal subjects of such a generous ruler it is your duty to help. I suggest you give one-third of your autumn crops in addition to the ordinary taxes in season."

One-third of the harvest in addition to all other taxes! How then to pay the moneylenders? How to get new loans from them, loans of seed grain or money for dowries, for wedding feasts and deaths if you could not pay the interest you owed them? How to keep enough for one or two meals a day?

"It is not possible!"

"One-third supertax would mean starvation!"

"Thou knowest it as well as we do!"

"Do I?" The kamdar looked to the patel and the Brahman. "Do you mean to say that your village is as poor as all that? Come, come! You are joking. Sitapur is the best village of all. Nowhere are crops as good. And you want to be behind other villages in loyalty and duty? You, the richest of all, want to be beaten by those half-starved crowds of Govindpur and Bornagar, of Gokulpur and Bishmapur? Each of them has promised one-third, poor as they are compared to you!"

How could other villages have promised anything at all, if Sitapur was the first village the sirdar had sent his envoy to,

because he loved it best? And why did the kamdar call their inhabitants half-starved crowds? Vikram remembered the wedding meal Govindpur had given him. He also remembered the Gokulpur bride, and all that had then been said about the bounty of Gokulpur water and soil. Did the kamdar joke? But he looked angry rather than in a joking mood. Why did not the patel or the Brahman point out to him his mistake? Or Father? And why had the kamdar stopped all talk of this hero? Praise be to the gods, here was the patel getting up at last. Let him tell the kamdar true facts. It was his duty to defend his village. What was he saying? Vikram could not believe his ears. Why, he did not put matters straight at all. He made them even worse!

"If other villages have promised one-third we cannot do much less. Our devotion to the sirdar is not less than theirs."

"Our devotion is great but so are the taxes. What can we do? Even now our children go hungry."

"The patel is a rich man! His children always have plenty."

"How to pay off my late father's debts?"

"How to find a husband for my daughter? With no dowry and no trinkets, what am I to do?"

"How to buy an ox in place of my old one that has died? Without oxen, how can I plough my field to raise the crops for taxes?"

"How to marry off my son if I can't afford even the presents for the bride?"

"My heart bleeds to hear all these disloyal words." The kamdar had risen, pulling his elaborate orange turban into place. "You ungrateful and unworthy wretches! Only of yourselves you think, only of your own petty affairs. Your oxen, your daughters, your sons. Let me tell you that because of you the sirdar cannot betroth the second kunwar sahib. Yes, it is true. To your eternal shame the hero of Badoli cannot be betrothed because the sirdar in his generosity has never taxed

you as other princes tax their subjects. And instead of being grateful for his leniency, instead of welcoming the opportunity of standing by him in his hour of triumph, you do nothing but grumble. Where is your loyalty? A dishonour you are to the whole of Rajistan! A Rajistan village to forsake its king just when his son has made the state famous before all! "

" We don't forsake him! "

" We are proud of the Kunwar sahib! "

" We are loyal. But we cannot pay one-third more on our crops."

" Do you want me to return to the capital and tell the sirdar of your disloyalty? Tell him that you do not want to contribute to the hero of Badoli's betrothal? Tell him that you don't care whether the hero of Badoli will have sons or not? "

" No! No! "

" We want our kunwar sahib to marry."

" Very well." The kamdar's voice became gentler. " Will you pay the third? "

" Not one-third! "

" We cannot! "

" It means starvation! "

" You don't accept? Then I have no other way than to assess myself what each man has to pay as his contribution. The meeting is over. To-morrow I shall start on my rounds. Let every man be ready for my visit."

What could it mean? How much would the kamdar take away? He would not touch the well money, would he? No, that was impossible. Dulari's dowry. The well. Vikram's head was reeling. But one thing he was aware of : on their way home neither Father nor the uncles spoke a single word.

VIII

WELL, THAT HAS SETTLED HAMIRA. IF HE DOES NOT PAY HIS ninety-one rupees I shall make him."

"He knows." The patel smiled a trifle wryly. For hours he had been trailing in the kamdar's wake, assessing taxes and having to face the ill-concealed hostility of the peasants. "Hamira is no fool."

"He certainly isn't. His are model fields. If every one farmed with such success it would be a pleasure to collect taxes. And profitable, too."

The patel cleared his throat. "May I ask a favour of Your Honour?"

"Of course. Speak out." The kamdar even smiled in spite of guessing what was coming next. The patel was serving him well. It was good policy to keep him contented—though not too much so. Saturation quenches zeal. Let there always be room for further wishes so that they can be played upon!

"Your Honour knows how difficult people become whenever taxes are concerned. But they do not dare turn against so great a man. As long as Your Honour is in Sitapur they grumble in silence only. Afterwards they turn on me, saying that I didn't stand up for the village. They become my enemies because I serve Your Honour well."

"So thou shouldst. It has not been to thy disadvantage as far as I know."

"It hasn't, O giver of bread. But times become more and more difficult. This present tax will create much ill-feeling. People will make no end of trouble about their labour on Your Honour's own fields. If I drive them they go against me."

"And refuse thee thy own ten days' labour, eh? That is what ails thee!"

"It is not all, O giver of bread. True, I cannot get out of them any work on my fields, small as they are. But——"

"Why canst thou not? Take the police to help thee."

"I am not as great a man as Your Honour. Besides, all my efforts and the constable's have no other aim but to ensure labour for the sirdar and Your Honour."

"So what dost thou want?"

"I have to feed my children and provide for them. It is thou, O giver of bread, who art my father. Through thee only can I feed them. In view of all I shall have to face because of this present tax, do bestow on me three pice in the rupee instead of the usual two."

"Dost thou want to cheat the sirdar? What of him and the second kunwar sahib if every bit of the taxes is swallowed by greedy people like thyself?"

"Three pice in the rupee is so little, Your Honour!"

"It is too much, thou idiot. I have finished."

"How am I to stand up to the villagers for the sirdar and your Honour if my mind is benumbed for worrying over my children's food and future?"

"Listen. Thou canst ask more of the people than usual. I shall back thee. Thus thou canst ask an increase of three pice instead of only one. But it is the peasant that will pay that increase, not the sirdar. Dost thou see?"

"I see, O giver of bread. If Your Honour will stand by me——"

"I shall."

"Also in the case of Hamira and all the others we have already visited?"

"Also in their case. Thou wilt be a rich man. Ah, here is the risaldar's lane. But let us first go to the left, to our unwise friend of last night. 'So it is an order!' The cheek of it! He will now see what orders are. What didst thou say was his name?"

"Hanuta. But it was not he that spoke. It was his brother who always talks too much."

"Anyhow, it is his blood. How much can he pay?"

"They have not much. They don't rank with people like Hamira."

"Is he lazy?"

"No, he works hard, but somehow he and his never manage to prosper. They have no well. I hear they want to dig a well after this harvest."

"If they can manage to dig a well there must be money."

"There may be a bit left over from the last dowry they got. It can't be much. The dowry was not a big one, and I remember that it paid a number of overdue taxes. Only very little can be left."

"We shall see. Why dost thou insist on their poverty? Dost thou want to fleece them all by thyself?"

The patel kept his peace. After all, why should he worry about others?

The accountant had appraised the crops. Now the kamdar gave his verdict.

"Eighty-five rupees, and not an anna less! With such splendid crops on thy fields thou wouldst deny the sirdar? Be careful!"

"I don't want to deny the sirdar." Father was breathing heavily. "I want to give all I can, but not what I cannot give."

"You people always say you can't. If I believed your laments each of you would pay only a rupee a year. Or perhaps you would say you can't afford even that. Liars all!"

The uncles, Rameshwar, and Vikram stood astonished to hear Father talked to like that.

"I am no liar." Father's face was an ashen grey, but his voice remained steady. "I shall explain all I have got. After harvest we hope to have fifteen to eighteen rupees over the usual

taxes and interests. Ask the patel, ask anybody thou likest. They all will testify that we have no more."

"No more? And how wilt thou dig a well on eighteen rupees? Thou must have money hidden away."

"Not an anna, not a pice!"

"Wherefrom wouldst thou pay for the well, then?"

"We have kept fifty-one rupees dowry money for it."

Vikram's heart missed a beat. Surely this money could not be taken away! No longer did it seem to him Dulari's. It was the well's! It belonged to the soil and to all the crops it would give.

"Truth at last! Didn't I say thou hast money hidden away, thou wretch? I should tax thee over a hundred rupees after such disgraceful behaviour. A bad servant of the sirdar thou art, a faithless dog! A hundred and twenty-five rupees would not be enough after that!"

Father and his clan stood motionless. Nobody spoke.

"But the sirdar in his generosity always wants to remit your dues. Therefore I shall leave it at eighty-five rupees in spite of thy lies. Be glad to get off so easily."

"We cannot pay. I told Your Honour all we have. And we need the well. There will be more returns if we have water. We shall be able to pay more taxes with a well of our own."

"Wilt thou? How? Worthless wretches like thee scheme and plot to pay less, not more. I know that breed of dogs."

Father spoke with difficulty. "The outer fields lie fallow because we cannot water them. With them under the plough returns will increase."

The kamdar must see that! Vikram moved his lips as though in prayer. It was so simple. More water, more fields. More fields, more crops. More crops, more taxes. For his own advantage the kamdar must allow the well. O gods and goddesses, let him understand! If only he himself had thought of taking that seer of flour to the holy men this morning!

"The outer fields? Indeed, there can be no return if they lie

fallow." The kamdar was stroking his moustache with a thoughtful air.

Praise be to the gods! He understands!

"By the way, Hanuta, do all these fields belong to thee?" The kamdar's voice was less harsh now.

"Indeed they do. All those fields bordering the desert to the west are mine."

"I did not mean those. I meant these others, the ones on which we stand."

"The good fields? Of course they are mine. Your Honour knows they are. The whole village does."

"I am not so sure about that."

"Indeed they are mine, and have been my forbears'. I have a title-deed to each field of mine."

"Oh, if thou hast a title-deed, then everything is all right, of course. Hast thou? Or is it again one of thy lies?"

"Brother, thou knowest where I keep the title-deeds. Bring them here."

Wordlessly Elder Uncle went as bidden, which was a strange thing for him to do. Soon he was back with four well-thumbed documents.

"Here is the title-deed of the central fields, those on which we stand," said Father proudly. Though he could not read, he knew every inch of his documents.

Vikram breathed with relief. You could always trust Father to manage.

"Yes, I see." The kamdar glanced superficially over the documents, keeping in hand only the one describing the central fields. "So thou sayest that all the fields are lawfully thine?"

"Your Honour sees for himself. Each and all are ours by title-deed!"

"Again thou art a liar!" With one move the kamdar tore the document in two. "The central fields are not thine. How canst thou now prove that they are?"

"They are ours since centuries! It is the soil of our fathers! The whole village will testify——" Father's voice faltered.

"Will they? Well, here is the patel. He should know."

The patel lowered his head. No word came from his lips.

"That shows thee! Here is the village headman, a Jat like thyself, chosen by all of you for his manifold virtues. If he cannot bear witness for thee who can? The fields are not thine. I shall give them to thy neighbours to the south. They have asked for them."

"The Rajputs?"

"All their own fields lie fallow."

"They will let the soil starve!" This time Father spoke after his brothers. He was hardly audible.

"Either thou payest the eighty-five rupees or the Rajputs get these central fields."

What could a man do? Without the well he could not do his duty by the earth. But if he kept the money he would lose the best of his soil. The kamdar would give it to his own caste. The Rajputs would let it lie fallow, would let it starve under his nose, a few yards away from his own house! Starve the soil? No!

"I shall give the fifty-one rupees."

"I said eighty-five."

"I have not got them."

"What about the surplus after harvest?"

"We don't know yet how much it will be."

"Thou didst say fifteen to eighteen. Well, in view of the sirdar's generosity and my own concern for you I shall remit twenty rupees. Didst thou hear? Remittance of full twenty rupees! Why does thou not thank me?"

"I—thank Your Honour."

"Thou hast reason to. I let thee off with only sixty-five rupees. Thou art lucky."

"I am lucky." Hearing Father repeat the words under his

breath Vikram almost burst into tears. But he would not cry like a child in front of that man.

"Come on, Patel. By their lies these people have made us waste a lot of time. There is still much work before us."

"And the title-deed, Your Honour?" This was Elder Uncle.

"After your disgraceful conduct you shouldn't get one. But I shall be clement. Come for a new title-deed at the patel's house to-morrow."

"To-morrow morning?"

"No, in the evening. Do you people think I have nothing to do but be at your beck and call? And don't forget to bring three rupees for it."

"Three rupees?"

"Well, if thou wantest a title-deed, thou must pay for it, mustn't thou? Who gets a document for nothing? But if thou dost not want it——"

"I shall be there."

When kamdar and patel had departed, the men still stood motionless. They did not talk. They did not sit down but stood, as though rooted in their soil.

"Why does Sister-in-law Kunti say there will be no well?" asked Baby Shanti. "Tell me, Mother. We shall have our well, shan't we?"

Mother did not answer. For once she sat idle, unable to move a limb. Much of what had happened in the fields the women had gathered through Elder Uncle's hurried words when he came in for the documents. After that they had sent out little Kispu to tell them what was going on.

"Who says there will be no well?" Father's Mother spoke sternly. "Kunti, stop talking nonsense. There will be a well, of course."

"But, Dadi!"

"How?"

"Didst thou not hear?"

"All the money gone!"

"Nothing left!"

"How can we dig the well?"

Lajja and Shushla were now crying loudly. Only Father's Mother and Mother remained dry-eyed.

"Will you stop that noise? Be ashamed of yourselves!" Father's Mother looked round with severity. "Granddaughters-in-law, a bad example to give to these girls about to marry."

"It is not because of ourselves we cry, Dadi! It is because of our men's grief. Look how they stand motionless. How will they bear up?" New wailing broke out. Even Mother's eyes were now wet.

"They will bear up as men should, especially if you women do your duty."

"But even then we cannot give them the well!"

"Can't you? Be thrifty. Get up earlier. Work later hours. Bend your back more often. Spin and weave. Waste nothing, not a blade of dry grass, not a twig, however small. Eat less yourselves but feed the men well, lest they lose their strength. Ask for no ornaments or clothes, neither by word nor look. Do all this, and we shall have the well."

"If only Jagdish were of marriage age, we could get his wife's dowry! As it is, there will be Koshaliya's and Lajja's weddings. Boys bring in, girls take out." Mother let her thoughts shape themselves into words.

Koshaliya and Lajja hung their heads while Kunti and Dulari raised theirs. But Dadi again interfered. "For shame, Daughter-in-law! Are these the right words for this hour? Dowry indeed! We had Dulari's, yet it is no longer ours. Your hands, your backs, your minds cannot be taken away. Work. Bear children. Help your men. Then, one day, the well will be ours."

"Art thou sure, Mother-in-law?"

"I am sure. There are the fields, and, underneath them, water. The sacred water knows that we want it to rise, that our fields cry out to bear it in their womb. If we are now denied to do the water's bidding it is not our fault. The soil and water know. O water, rise thyself and permeate the fields! O soil, permit the crops to rise a hundredfold! Meantime we work and strive and pray and sacrifice until the well is dug. O water, help the soil! O soil, respond to help! O hear me, sacred two!"

Then she bade Dulari and Kunti to prepare the meal. "I know we shall have our well," Dulari said.

For once Kunti agreed with her. "I know too."

When the men at last returned, filled with bitterness, there were the women to receive them with determined hope and love.

IX

WISTFULLY DULARI LOOKED ACROSS THE YARD TO HER ROOM. FOR many days to come she would not share it with Vikram. Her hour was upon her at last.

She sat on the low stool in the little hut in which the women spent their monthly time of seclusion, when they were not allowed contact with anyone or anything for fear of pollution. Often, looking across from her own room to Mother's, Kunti's and, lately, Koshaliya's seclusion she wondered what it would be like to stay in the little shed. Now she was here for the first time. She would not be here often. For confinements, yes, but not often between them. Dulari wanted at least fifteen children.

Now the pain became worse. It was good to have the midwife near already. She was an untouchable of the tanner sub-caste,

for only the lowest castes pollute themselves with midwifery. There she squatted in her dirty rags, chewing betel-leaf and looking utterly unconcerned.

"We shall now close the door, Granddaughter, lest demons enter and hinder easy birth." Praise be to the gods and goddesses—here was Dadi! Dulari had hoped she would come, for old women have not to fear pollution, but she had not been certain. Dadi had not been too well lately.

Oh, what pain! What incredible pain! Never had she dreamed that it would be as bad as that. Fifteen children were too many! Ten would do. Eight. Now it was easing. Praise be to the great goddess.

"Sit still, Granddaughter, between the pains. And when it starts again hold on to this hempen loop. There—like that."

"Dadi—is my child coming? I am sure it is. The pain—oh, here it is!"

"Thou foolish woman! This is only the beginning. It will be hours before the child is born."

"Perhaps days," the midwife added.

"No—oh, no! Dadi, this must be the end! In the beginning there were long intervals. Now the pains are nearly constant. Oh—Dadi!" Would every birth be as bad as this? Was this what Mother had suffered with each of her children? And Mother-in-law—and Kunti? Yet they did not make anything of it. She must be brave. It should not be said that the second daughter-in-law did not equal the first in valour.

"There, that is better. Now thou art smiling, Granddaughter. Abide thy time in patience. Soon thy child will suckle at thy breast."

"Dadi——" abruptly Dulari closed her lips. The pain was on her again, but this time she would not moan.

Whispering in the courtyard. "What is it, Dadi?"

But already the whispering had changed into song. Kunti, Koshaliya, Lajja, and Shushila were singing a mournful tune.

"*Mahri sasuji ne ware bula*
Ahb nahin jishiyun re
Dekho larka tharo hai."

"My mother-in-law hither call!
I shall not now survive.
See, my unborn son is yours."

Even in her pain Dulari could not help smiling. This was the first part of the song about a young woman's fear of death in her first labour. How foolish! True, each pain was worse than the one before. But she would not lose courage. There was her son. *She* would raise him, no one else.

As though in response to her thoughts the women went on to the song's second part.

"*Mahri sasuji ne ware bula*
Ahb nahin marshiyun re
Main jayo hai
Ahb nahin marshiyun re."

"My mother-in-law hither call!
Now I will not die.
I am now mother.
Now I will not die."

What a lovely song! "I am now mother." Am I? "Dadi, Dadi! The pain!"

"Hold fast, Granddaughter! Thy hands can help. Push hard! Listen to me! Push! Don't stop. There—that is better."

"Dadi! Oh, Dadi!" She was rent asunder.

"Come, midwife. Who would have thought it? After so few hours! This Govindpur bride can teach all the others how to be quick. There!"

"Is it a boy, Dadi?"

"A splendid boy, Granddaughter. Thou art a lucky woman."

"Does—he know?"

"His mother will tell him. Well do I remember how I told my son about Vikram's birth."

"Dadi, let me have my son." My son! He, she, one. He, she, now a second he. My son!

"Here is thy son, Granddaughter. Perfect in every limb, his skin like ghi and honey. Let him grow into a man."

"I will, Dadi. Dadi—what is it? Thy breath is loud."

"Be still, Granddaughter. Thou art after birth."

"Midwife, open the door!"

"What of the demons entering?"

"O goddess, keep them out! Open the door! In here there is no air. Oh, Dadi, Dadi—to stay with me thou camest into this hut! Let me rub thy hand. Do let me——"

"Listen, child." The voice came from afar. "I have not much time left. Bring up thy son. Bear more sons. Do not forget the well. As man plants his seed in woman's womb, so woman plants her thought into his heart. Look to the well. Then I shall die content."

"I promise, Dadi. Now thou promise, too! Dost thou remember the tank, the shrine? Thou saidst to the goddess, 'Let not the evil ones take an old life within the house because a new is born. Her child shall bring prosperity, not death.' I marked thine every word. Oh, Dadi, stay with us! If thou goest now my son is marked in all his earthly life, for he who brings evil luck gets evil welcome. If I, his mother, could not be happy with my first-born son how, then, could others? Stay with us—with him! Oh, help, great goddess!"

One breath. Another. Then the breathing ceased.

A child's cry.

"Son!"

"Granddaughter!"

So Lackshmi guards her own.

PART THREE

I

THEY WILL COME! TO-MORROW, OR EVEN TO-DAY! FIVE BULLOCK-carts won't hold them! " Kispu ran into the house, shouting in delight and whirling round like a top.

Shanti was quick to spread the news. " They will come; they will come! " she chanted, jumping so that her bead necklace, the one and only garment of a Rajputana girl child, swung up and down. " In ten bullock-carts they come. Sugar and honey they bring. And bread and ghi, too."

" Sugar and ghi! " Little Bhagwana, Dulari's first-born, feeling grown up because he was now elder to Brother Gangu and Sister Jiji, was quick to join in his uncle's and aunt's delight. " Ten bullock-carts full of sugar and ghi! "

" What nonsense all of you talk! " Shushila looked disgustedly at the youngsters from the height of her twelve years. " Actors are in the carts, not food. The patel sahib sent two bullock-carts for them. They have only one of their own."

" We shall have to think of their food." Mother looked up from her spinning-wheel with a worried expression. " It seems as though we cooked for them only yesterday."

" Mother! " Now the children spoke all at once. " For a whole year there was no play! We have waited so long for the actors to come! "

" Well, there was the recitation from the *Ramayana*. We had to feed the bards. Now it's the actors."

"But we love the play! So we must take our share in feeding the actors." Lajja was sometimes outspoken.

Dulari looked up. Children should not teach their elders. Poor Mother! In good days she had enjoyed plays as much as anyone, but now she was too worried. If only Dadi were here she would find the right words to cheer Mother. But she was staying with Youngest Uncle, who had lost his wife a bare three weeks ago. It was strange to think how much they all relied on Dadi. Now, she would have said the very thing to make Mother smile.

Dulari took a deep breath. "Thy food is always praised before all, Mother-in-law. Every year actors and bards have rated it the best in the whole village."

As she had hoped, Mother couldn't help smiling. "Aye, it is easy to prepare good food if there is something to prepare it with."

Lajja took up the clue. "Thy food was praised higher than the risaldar's two years ago, Mother."

"We sent two dhals and three vegetables."

"And many curds and relishes."

"And three kinds of bread!"

"And a sweet, with ghi and sugar."

"And saffron and raisins!"

"Mother, I'm hungry!" Shanti suddenly wailed.

"Mother, I'm hungry!" Bhagwana ran to Dulari.

After the children had been bundled off with the promise of milk at night none of the women spoke. They all felt sharp pangs of hunger through the mere mention of rich food. For nearly a year they had had but one meal a day, the maize gruel at noon. No more chappatis with onions or chillies, no more gruel at night. Such milk as the two buffaloes gave—and one was now going dry—was made into ghi for sale. They never had any milk themselves. Ghi fetched eight annas per seer, at times even ten. Every bit of money was needed for taxes

and moneylenders. There had been that new debt contracted nearly three years ago for Koshaliya's wedding. There had also been the locusts.

Mother stared, unseeing at first then fixing her gaze on Kunti and Dulari. She could not contain herself any longer. "What am I to do? The smaller children cry from hunger. Here are the two of you, the one big with child in her belly, the other suckling her last with no good milk to give to it. Every one cries out against me, in words or mutely. What do all of you want of me? I cannot feed you my own body, and if I could it would be useless to you, all bones and leathery skin as I am. That poor little daughter of thine will soon be too far gone even to wail. Where am I to get brown sugar?" With a sob she hid her face between her gnarled hands.

"There are always the moneylenders." Kunti gazed into space, and did not look at Mother. If Dulari, that accursed Govindpur sister-in-law, did not see to getting brown sugar and proper food when nursing, that was her own affair. She herself would make sure that she got her due as soon as she had delivered. Nobody could exist on such scanty fare and suckle at the same time. She was certain Dulari ate things on the sly.

"Moneylenders!" Mother's voice was full of contempt. "They have grown rich on us and fed on our lifeblood ever since I can remember. But when times became bad, when the locusts destroyed our spring harvest just a year ago, did they share with us the wealth they had through our sweat? The locusts had not touched their gold and silver bars, their jewels and the grain in their dumps. Locusts cannot touch the moneylenders, but they ate all our wheat and barley, our gram and poppies."

"And tobacco."

"And all the vegetables we had planted between."

"Without anything we were left," Mother continued. "Without food, fodder, or seeds. So we had to go to the moneylenders asking for all three. Man cannot be without food, nor

can beasts. Least of all can the soil. Just as a woman longs to bear a child, so does the earth expect to bear full fruit. We can't deny her, for she is our life as we are hers. So we borrowed for seed. Fodder and food came later." Mother's voice broke.

"And the moneylenders said, 'The whole village comes to us for help. How can we feed both man and cattle in every house? We have become beggars ourselves. Our fields, too, have been laid waste by the pests."

"This was not true." Mother sat bolt upright. "The village was badly hurt in certain parts but none as bad as the fields which lay in the path of the locusts, the fields this side—ours, the risaldar's, and the Rajputs'. We had it the worst. The moneylenders had enough grain for seeds and food and fodder, enough and to spare for more than one village. Those whose fields had not been destroyed didn't ask them for anything. So they could have helped us easily with good grain. But what did they do, those accursed hounds? Just because we were helpless, just because we couldn't do without, they scraped together the worst seeds that were rotting in forgotten corners, seeds nobody else would have accepted. These we had to plant. Never had we offered the soil such grain to take into her womb. It is sin."

"Not ours!" Dulari, Lajja, and Shushila spoke together.

"Yet we were forced to commit it. The Rajputs didn't plant at all, that's their way out, lazy dogs that they are. The risaldar is rich. He could afford to pay cash for good seed. We had to take the worst and pay highest interest."

Kunti spoke. "The risaldar is rich because both he and his sons get so much money every month from their soldiering. The Viceroy sends it to them, straight from his palace in Delhi. If our men were soldiers, too, we wouldn't be as poor as we are, with no food in our bellies and no cloth to cover our children with." With a frown Kunti looked at her daughters—like all other children, naked but for their bead necklaces.

"Thou wouldst want our men to be soldiers and leave the earth!" Mother said. "Yes, I can believe that of thee. Thou wast never one to care for the soil. Yet thy daughters' dowry will come from it."

A man leave the soil? Dulari shook her head. No, not leave the soil and his woman! Both needed him. What would she do without her lord, without his nearness and love to comfort her at night and the thought of it to carry light into her heart throughout the day? If only she could feed him better. But they all went desperately hungry ever since the visit of the locusts. Dadi had predicted it.

"It is not only brown sugar thou needest." Mother came back to her first point, fixing her gaze on Dulari and Baby Jiji. "From the birth of this little one thou didst not get the food that should have been thine."

"Thou hadst brown sugar for me, Mother-in-law." Tears veiled Dulari's eyes when she remembered how Mother had cast aside family pride and had borrowed brown sugar for her who lay in childbed.

"It lasted but three days. Much more is needed after birth. Dost thou not remember thy first?"

"So I do, Mother-in-law." Never would Dulari forget those blissful days. "Brown sugar and ghi the first three days, and halwa during the second."

"And what is this halwa made of? Thou must learn to look after thy own daughters-in-law some day, eh?"

"Do thou tell me, Mother." Dulari knew very well, but it would give Mother pleasure to explain.

"Make thou a good thick halwa, adding semolina to brown sugar and ghi. Flavour it with dry ginger and marjoram. That gives strength. Thou knowest that on the seventh day after birth when a mother is given her first bath, she needs strength to receive the women who sing and bring presents. That is why the halwa must be well prepared."

"Thine was, Mother-in-law. When at night my son and I were taken out of the house for the first time so we could see the stars, I felt I could keep awake for ever."

"Aye, those were good days. Bhagwana was lucky to be born then."

"At Gangu's birth thou gavest me everything, too. It was six weeks later that the locusts did descend on us. It is only now——"

"Yes, only now. Look at this Jiji of thine. Scarcely can she breathe for weakness. Thy milk is not what it was when thy first was born. Then we had everything in plenty. Now there is buttermilk and whey only for my man and the smallest children. Poor Jiji! Kunti will have her child after harvest. Then I might get a little bit of this or that for her. But what can I do for thee now?"

Dulari sighed. If only her milk were as good as when she had Bhagwana! Then she could have suckled two, nay, even three children, so great was the bounty the great goddess had bestowed on her. Last year, even though Gangu had been barely six weeks old when the locusts came and poverty began, her breasts had held sweet white milk for him for many months. Jiji was half the size her brothers had been at the same age. She drowsed or wailed, and no wonder. To Dulari her own milk looked thin and bluish when she pressed a nipple to make it flow into Jiji's sad little mouth. Last night, when Kunti was gone, Mother had passed to Dulari a goblet half filled with whey. Dulari had pressed Mother to drink it herself, and finally had given it to Bhagwana. Mother ate less than any of them, save Dadi. How old and wasted she looked! What could she now say to cheer her?

All of a sudden Dulari knew. "Not only will thy food again be acclaimed by the actors, Mother-in-law, but all of us will work doubly well after the play. Eh, Shushila, Little Sister?"

"No need for her to go to the play. She thinks anyhow she is as perfect as Queen Sita." Lajja grimaced good-naturedly.

"Elder Sister, dost thou not know?" Shushila had listened carefully to the news the uncles and others had brought about the performance. "This time is it not the *Ramayana* and Queen Sita. The play is of Queen Draupadi, out of the *Mahabharata*."

"Draupadi?" Lajja sounded vague.

"Draupadi, the Panchala King's daughter, who Lord Krishna commanded through the saint's mouth to wed the Pandava kings, she who——"

Mother interrupted. "We shall hear all this to-morrow, and from people who know better than thou dost, Shushila. Go about thy work. Finish the dung-cakes instead of telling us about kings and queens."

Usually this was a morning task, so that the stark midday sun should dry the cakes clapped on to the outer wall of the house. Kunti and Lajja much approved of Mother's sending Shushila out to do this work disliked by all, even when the sun was already on his downward path. She was always quoting this or that, always boring them with bits of the *Ramayana* or the *Mahabharata*, as though she herself were a bard! Dadi had stuffed her head with such unnecessary things. Learning was not for girls. Let the afternoon dung-cakes teach her a woman's place.

Silently Shushila went out. Dulari was sorry for her. Later she would join Little Sister in her task but now she had first to make Mother smile. "Let us speak of preparations, Mother-in-law. Thy food will taste the best of all sent to the actors, I know."

"What with, Daughter?"

"Didst thou not say yesterday that we have more than five seers of ghi? Whatever is prepared with ghi, bread or vegetables alike, is food fit for a king. The cauliflowers and carrots are ripe, so are the eggplants——"

"They are needed for sale, Daughter. And we cannot touch the ghi. My man needs it to pay some bit of interest to that accursed moneylender."

Dulari knew now about interests and taxes. Did not her lord speak to her about them at night when she lay snuggled against him, his dear hands still upon her? "There is some ghi over the five seers, Mother-in-law. And the vegetables are plentiful. Even if a meal is provided for the actors, there remain enough for sale."

"Enough?" For a moment Mother's tired thoughts centred on the word. "Enough?" What could she not do if there were enough! Feed her man, who looked so careworn and bowed down. Feed her two elder sons in the prime of their manhood, when blood should flow lustily in their veins, yet now, with so little she could spare for their one meal, looking sapless and weak. Feed those carrying or nursing daughters-in-law with their ever-hungry children who did not get their due. Feed her own three daughters. Lajja was past fourteen, yet no marriage had been arranged for her. They were too poor for wedding feast and dowry. But it was wrong to keep her at home unwed —more, it was sin. Better any man than none. Only through marriage, only through her lord, could a woman find salvation for her soul. She must speak to Father again. Poor they might be, but not sinners.

"So thou wilt manage," concluded Dulari. "Besides chillies and onions there are garlic and fresh coriander and sesame for flavouring. There is dill, too."

"Listening to thee one would think there is plenty and to spare." But Mother couldn't help smiling. "Now go for water. There is little left. Shushila or Lajja can help thee. I shall look after the cattle. Kunti, stay with the little ones. Thou art too far gone now to work outside."

"What of the play, Mother-in-law? Can I not go?"

"Big as thou art? What art thou thinking of? No daughter

of mine shall thus show herself to men." Mother was already outside the courtyard.

"Oh!" Kunti's eyes filled with tears. Nothing pleasant ever happened and if it did she was left behind. Dulari was having all the pleasure.

"Everything happens by turns," said Lajja, who easily interpreted Kunti's expression. "Another time it will be Second Sister to stay at home because of childbirth."

Kunti snorted in disdain.

Was it thus that Kunti rewarded a well-meant remark? Lajja smiled mischievously. "Perhaps thy next will be a son. The great goddess can work a miracle even on one who cannot bear males."

Kunti's tears were dried by rage. "The great goddess might even work the miracle of finding thee a husband. Thy parents do not do so. In my village it would be considered a shame to leave a girl unwed so late."

"Dare thou not open thy foul mouth against our parents! They are far too good for thee, thou daughter and granddaughter of noseless bitches! Thou shouldst have a mother-in-law to beat thee with a thorny stick three times a day, like poor Shanti's, or one who plunges thy hand into boiling dhal, as the old Rajput neighbour does to her daughters-in-law if they spill something. Mother is far too good to thee. Why, I know who stole the milk the other day. Thou and thy clan——"

"Stop it, Younger Sister," said Dulari. "Elder Sister is ill with her pregnancy. Now come with me to fetch water."

"Ill? She is angry that she can't go to the play. Ill! No son can she bear her man——"

"Thou she-demon! Glad thou wouldst be without a nose even, hadst thou but a man to be unfaithful to, a man that would trouble to cut it off!"

But Dulari had taken the buckets and rope and, collecting her

own children, pushed the reluctant Lajja across the veranda towards the well.

Kunti was left to herself and her daughters. Helplessly she wrung her hands, wishing she had Dulari's or Lajja's throat between them. Those infernal bitches! Accursed be they to devour their own descendants into seven times seven generations! It was Lajja who had insulted her, but, in reality, the fault lay with Dulari. It was she who caused every mischief. Parading her two sons about, being made much of by everybody! The mother of the first grandson, indeed! As though it were her own merit. It was the merit of Vikram, that strong man of hers. Like a banyan-tree he stood in his towering strength, like a king among men. Lying in his arms she herself would have conceived six sons already. Her own man was always a weakling, and now, with no proper food in his belly, he was of no use to her at all. She despised him. He could give her but girls and make her an object of ridicule. What did his tepid embrace mean to her but boredom and rage? Let her lie at Vikram's side, let his strong arms hold her fast, his breath mingle with hers, his tree-like strength enter her being! Then people would see whose were the better sons, hers or Dulari's!

Somehow Kunti felt comforted by the thought. Many things might happen. Perhaps some day she would take Dulari's place.

II

SHALL I HELP THEE WITH THE DUNG-CAKES? "

Shushila looked up. " Soon I'll have finished, Elder Sister. Do not trouble."

" But I'd like to, especially if thou tellest me of Queen Draupadi."

"Thou knowest more than I do, Elder Sister."

"No, I don't. I have no memory. At home Little Sister's head was much better than mine. She always remembered what the Brahman chanted or the bards recited, just as thou dost. Now I come to think of it, she rarely recited about Queen Draupadi. I can't remember anything. Never has there been a play about her, either."

"Yes, it's strange that we know so much more of the *Ramayana* than of the *Mahabharata*. Yet it's much the older."

"Even this thou knowest!"

"Dadi told me. And one time the bards recited about the Panchali-daughter of the King of Panchala-Draupadi, the Queen. Lord Krishna said that none was greater than she in piety and holiness. Just think of that being said of a woman! There, this is the last dung-cake!" Smilingly Shushila clapped it on the wall, already well plastered with rapidly drying disks. "So thou wantest the story of Queen Draupadi? Listen. The five persecuted Pandava kings were in exile in her father's lands. Unknown were they to everybody. They went about in beggar's garb. But one day, when King Draupada tested his daughter's suitors for courage and skill, Prince Arjuna in his disguise bent the magic bow, sped the shaft, and hit the mark in the presence of nobles and warriors. So King Draupada had to give his fair daughter, the most beautiful maiden that earth had ever seen, to an unknown pauper. When he turned out to be Prince Arjuna——"

Jiji, cradled in her mother's arms, began suddenly to wail. Dulari let go of Gangu, who was sitting astride her left hip. She uncovered her breasts, wondering as often before about the contrast between deep brown nipples and fair skin. Kunti and all the other girls were much darker. Her skin was always fairest, praise be to the gods. Milk flowed into Jiji's mouth, but she let it drop out again. The boys had always suckled lustily, had impatiently pressed their little heads into her breast, had

snapped and gurgled and demanded as though they came as conquerors. They were sons, and Jiji was but a girl, and there was no energy in her. Though she wailed for food, she did not fight for it. It had to be put into her mouth, only then did she start sucking for herself. True, Dulari had but thin and bluish milk to offer her these days. Perhaps, in better times, she would have drunk as lustily as her brothers before her. No, she wouldn't. Girls were not men. Women always had to suffer. Mother home in Govindpur—did Second Mother, accursed be she, still bear a child every year? Little Sister, whose wedding Dulari had not been able to attend because of Gangu's birth and who, so Dulari had heard from a visiting cousin, was being led a bad life by a severe mother-in-law, with curses and many blows—how they all suffered! Dulari wondered when her own turn would come. Until now she had been spared, in spite of locusts and hunger. The parents were kind. And her lord—was ever a woman as happy?

Hastily Dulari touched the charm she wore round her neck. The gods might punish her for such prideful thoughts. Perhaps they would think she was too happy. Did Little Sister still remember all that the bards had recited? It would help her in her woes to know about the fortitude and goodness of great queens. The knowledge of their virtues helped every woman in her daily rounds, and made her a better wife and daughter. What a pity her own head was so empty! To-morrow night she would open eyes and ears to listen and learn. Was it not for her dear lord, too, he who made her so happy? Him she wanted to serve—him and his sons and his sons-to-be. To him she wanted to be what Sita and Draupadi, the mighty queens, had been to their own lords. She knew her love to be as great as theirs.

"Go on, Little Sister. Tell me quickly, for I must go to work again. What happened when the beggar turned out to be Prince Arjuna himself, the strongest and mightiest of the five Pandava kings?"

III

I MUST TALK TO THEE." MOTHER HAD SEEN FATHER RETURNING BY himself from the fields and, instead of looking after the cattle as she had intended, had gone out to meet him. Rarely did he come without his brothers and sons. Was he ill? Usually he stayed with the others until the day's work was done.

"What is it, Sita-rani?" It was seldom now that Father used the suffix rani, queen, that his mother had joined to his bride's name many years ago. Queen of his heart and house. That is what it had meant and still did mean. No second wife for him. He was not his brother.

"The actors have arrived. There will be many people coming from outside. I thought thou couldst talk to some. Lajja is over fourteen. Something must be done."

Father, who had lost some of his weariness at his wife's approach, seemed to shrink into himself. "I know she should be wed. Night and day I know. But what can I do? Thou knowest there is no money for wedding and dowry."

"Well do I know. But even the poorest of the poor must find husbands for their daughters. Marriages cannot be stopped by bad times. Many have become poorer. Thou wouldst not need to give a big dowry."

"I cannot give any. We owe much in taxes and interest as it is. The kamdar might attach a field or two. I won't have my good land go that way."

"Surely the Thakur sahib will not be hard the year after the locusts came down on us."

"The kamdar is hard. Even if we could manage a wedding he would be the first to say, 'If there is money for a wedding why is there none for the Thakur sahib?' He would only increase the taxes."

"But something must be done! Thou knowest that a father who does not marry off his daughter will suffer in hell."

"I know."

"Here I am, making worship for my lord's benefit, so that thy next incarnation may be assured. Of what avail are my endeavours if thou committest the greatest of sins?"

"I know."

"There thou standest, and hast nothing to say but 'I know.' Yet nothing is being done. I'll tell thee what we shall do. We shall take my remaining trinkets and give them to her. There is enough cloth for her garments. I kept it for this, though the others have had to go without. Tell the man who is to be Lajja's father-in-law that thou wilt give the dowry next year, or the year after next. He will understand when times are bad. Perhaps there is one with a son a cripple or——"

"I will not have my daughter marry a cripple. A healthy and pretty girl she is."

"I will not have my daughter remain unwed long after her time. It is I who am responsible for her chastity."

"Nothing untoward can happen. She is good. So are the men of Sitapur. None would look at a woman not his wife."

"A maiden unwed for years is to men like the bitch is to dogs." Mother's colour deepened. "And a woman cannot find salvation except through her lord. I will not have thee lose thy salvation and mine, too." Mother was weeping by now. "Take my trinkets. Sell fields. Only have her wed."

"Sell fields? Let the soil go to others? How could I look into the face of sons and grandsons? Times are bad enough without the loss of good fields. There is Bhagwana, there is Gangu. There will be others, if the gods bless us thus. There will be—the well."

"The well? If thou canst not afford to marry off thy daughter how dost thou think ever to have the well?"

"The soil will help, the soil and our labour. There will be

good crops. Now that the locusts have gone they will not come again for a long time. The well shall be ours."

"Meanwhile we live in sin."

"Listen, Sita-rani. Even if the money were there we couldn't marry off Lajja. There are the daughters of my brothers, too. Two are fourteen, one even fifteen. How could my daughter be wed if theirs cannot be?"

"For the sake of other people's daughters is mine to go unwed? For the sake of other people who often abuse and exploit thee? Well do I know their murmurings and doings. In their pots and pans and in their bellies there is more food than in ours, for dost thou not give them more grain to eat than thine own flesh and blood? Yet even then do they speak against thee, and take things behind thy back. I know why the sisters-in-law hide their cooking if I enter their houses."

"Do thou not say such things. They are not true. This is mere woman's talk."

"Oh, is it? Not true? And wherefore do the other women in the village ask me why my man and children look so haggard while my brothers-in-law and theirs look like the full moon?"

"It is hard with them, too."

"But not so hard as with us!"

"I have to think of their good. Am I not the eldest, standing in father's stead to all of them?"

"They do not thank thee, that ungrateful brood. Planning and plotting they are against thee and thine, all the time. And because of such people's daughters we must live in sin?"

"Would I live less in sin if, thinking only of my own salvation and not theirs, I married off my daughter and left theirs unwed? The eldest is responsible for all. He cannot think of his salvation without guarding theirs, too."

"And if they exploit thy foolish kindness, even abuse it?"

"Let them. Right is right."

"Right was right, and thine, the day the accursed kamdar

took away the money. How did that better things? Robbed we were, as we always are."

"Enough now, woman. I have lost much time with thy foolish talk." Father took a few steps towards the house.

"I shall send word to Sultana and tell him of our distress. He will not let my call go unheard, even if thou dost."

"Thou wilt do nothing of the kind."

"Indeed I will. There is no food for the children, no money to marry off a daughter, nothing to meet taxes or interests. Let Sultana take from the moneylenders or the kamdar, accursed be they! They have enough and to spare."

"Must I beat thee into seeing reason, woman? If Sultana did anything to the moneylenders here or to the kamdar for our sake I would soon be in gaol. Perhaps thy sons, too. Hast thou forgotten what they did to Hamira? When he left gaol he could no longer walk. Soon he died from their tortures. Sultana rides away like the wind. We have to remain."

"Mother, Mother!" Jagdish ran towards her. "The calf——" Seeing that Father was there, he stopped short.

"What of the calf?" Both parents started towards the yard.

"Elder Sister says the calf is very ill! It turns and turns."

"The worm!" For a second Father stopped short.

Mother was crying loudly. "My calf? My calf! Demons are on our stable, she-demons, the daughters of Kanda, the Sadanvas! May Rudra, the Lord of Creation, drive them away! May Indra with his thunderbolt destroy them!"

"Call Dadi, Son. Run as fast as thou canst."

In the yard they found the whole family gathered round the calf. It was spinning round and round on feet that became more and more unstable. The cow was trying to reach her calf, putting out her tongue in a vain effort to soothe its frenzy, panting and groaning as it escaped her.

"It is the worm, picked up with its food while grazing."

Kispu, whose task it was to look after the grazing cattle, wailed aloud. "I didn't know!"

"Nobody says it is thy fault, Son." Father put his arm round the trembling child. "It is the worm that now works in its brain. Oh——"

With long strides he crossed to the door through which Dadi entered, breathing heavily. "*Ma*, the worm sits in the calf. What can we do? Hold it and rub it down?"

With one look at the calf Dadi replied, "It is too late for that. Get the arundhati plant, though. It grows just outside. I will repeat the charm. Yes—water first. Sprinkle it. Then sprinkle it with its mother's urine. Take care not to take the other cow's. Then try to push it towards its mother as I say the words."

While the adults acted according to her orders and the children looked on, awe-stricken, Dadi began to chant: "As the heart of the lusty male hankers after the woman, thus shall thy heart, O cow, hanker after the calf!

"As the elephant directs its steps after the steps of the female, as the heart of the lusty male hankers after the woman, thus shall thy heart, O cow, hanker after the calf!

"As the felloe, and as the spokes, and as the nave of the wheel is joined, as the heart of the lusty male hankers after the woman, thus shall thy heart, O cow, hanker after the calf!"

Nobody spoke. The calf continued to whirl, the cow to pursue it frantically with her tongue.

"Aye, this charm works to make a cow to love her calf and treat it well." Dadi looked sadly round. "It worked well, for all of you now to behold. The cow is a good mother."

"But, Dadi——!" Was it a single imploring voice or an outcry from all of them?

"Here is the plant," cried Jagdish. Dadi took it and went as near to the calf as she could. "Now all of you unite your prayers with mine.

"Thy utmost protection, O arundhati, do thou bestow upon

steer and milk kine, upon cattle weaned from their mother, upon all four-footed creatures!

"May the herb arundhati bestow protection, and with the gods, render full of sap the stables, free from disease our men and beasts!

"The lovely, life-giving plant do I invoke. May she carry away, far from cattle, the missile hurled by Rudra!"

"Look, the whirling has ceased!"

"Praise be to the arundhati, the sacred herb!"

"Praise be to the gods!"

The calf was standing still. Frantically its mother licked it all over. For one moment it looked as though the evil had been conquered. Then the calf collapsed. In a long convulsion it stretched its tortured limbs. Father and Mother knelt at its side but did not touch it, lest they infringe upon the rights of the cow. A last convulsion, a last trembling. The cow gave a long, piercing wail.

"Is our calf well?" asked Shanti reverently. She had never before seen death.

When the children learned the truth from the elders' sad expressions they began to cry, for the calf had been one of them.

"There will soon be another," said Kunti.

"But it will not be *our* calf!" they cried.

Elder Uncle said, "It is a great loss for us. She would have made a splendid cow."

"A good milk-giver, indeed! Do you remember her grandmother, and the one before her? We had none to beat them."

"Well, there will be another soon, of the same mother. She is young as yet, and able to bear many a good she-calf if the gods bless us."

"Let us not worry overmuch. We shall have milk. There are the goats——"

Father looked into space. "We may not worry, but what of the cow? The mother has lost her child."

IV

AGAIN THERE IS LESS FLESH ON THY RIBS!" VIKRAM FINGERED them one by one, while they lay abed with Jiji cradled against Dulari and Gangu at their feet. Bhagwana slept with his grandmother as befitted the eldest grandson. "For this rib we shall have dhal, lots of it—*Mungh* pulse and *Urad* pulse and *Masoor* pulse, stewed for many hours and mixed with more ghi than we can think of. For this second one we shall have a whole mountain of shredded chappatis heavy with ghi and brown sugar—higher than Kailash Mountain. For the third rib we shall have —what shall we have, Dulari-rani?"

"Lots of milk!" was her prompt answer. "Milk and whey and cream and ghi!"

It was a nocturnal game that Vikram had begun after her roundness had gone. He put his hands one by one against her ribs, planning which dish would, in better days to come, clothe it again with firm flesh.

"Halva for this one. Dost thou eat still less?" Anxiously he pressed her against his heart.

"I ate more gruel than before. Mother saw to that." She always tried to make him believe that all was well with her. Fancy a man being so good and sweet as to give thought to a mere woman! At home Father had never bothered to take notice of Mother's condition—nor of the accursed Second One either.

"Then why do thy bones stick out more than before? We'll need many, many kinds of halva for this one—with silver leaf, just as thy people had it at our wedding meal."

"I've never eaten halva with silver leaf," she whispered, with longing in her voice.

"I will bring thee one with gold leaf some day. Thou art so

sweet and good, queen of my heart. All gold in the world is not too much to give for thee."

"My lord!" Had ever woman had such a man?

"Queen of my heart, of my every breath!" Had ever man had such a woman?

They were so rapt in each other that not for a long time did they notice the wailing that rent the night.

"The cow! She does so grieve for her calf."

She does not eat. She has lost much weight already."

"Like thou! Her ribs stick out."

"But——" No, she would not pronounce the words. If the demons heard her say proudly that she had not lost any of her children perhaps they would then set out to rob her of them. Quickly Dulari touched the charm that hung round her neck, murmuring a prayer meanwhile.

"I have been thinking——" Vikram stroked the heavy plait of her hair that lay across his arm.

"Yes?" A world of love lay in her tone.

"What the actors played to-night. I don't understand how it can be right for a woman to have five husbands. How could holy men approve of it?"

"They approved because Lord Krishna did."

"That is what I cannot understand. How can wrong be right? Is not a woman's chastity everything? If I thought thou wouldst play me foul——" Passionate jealousy swayed him even in her arms, even in the complete security of her loyalty.

"I could not understand, either. But after the first night of the play I asked Dadi. She explained it to me. Now I can understand."

"Tell me, and make me understand, too."

Dulari drew her veil over her hair. Even in the darkness her head should not be uncovered while she spoke of divine subjects. Then she began in an awed voice. "When King Draupada found that the beggar who had won his fair

daughter's hand was Prince Arjuna his heart rejoiced. So did Princess Draupadi's. But soon great sorrow and bewilderment came to them. Prince Arjuna had brought the glad tidings to his mother, Queen Kunti, and told her that his life's wish had been fulfilled, and that he was bringing to her pure feet God-bestowed gifts in a golden bowl. Full of joy she bade him share the golden bowl's heavenly contents with his four mighty brothers. Prince Arjuna then told her that it was fair Draupadi that he had won.

"He asked, 'How can I obey thy divine command yet go against His will? God's law does not let one woman belong to five men.' But the great sage Vyasa was sent to them by Lord Krishna in that very moment. And then Lord Krishna spoke through Vyasa. This is what he said——" Dulari paused.

"Why dost thou not go on?"

"How can a young and unwise being like myself repeat those words?"

"Dadi told them to thee. They are in the play, too. What were Lord Krishna's words?"

"They were: 'Take heed to Vyasa's words, for they are true. He is myself. Obey your mother's voice for it is mine. Wed Draupadi, the purest of the pure, and live with her in daily purity. For in this seeming breach of law divine there is embodied Heaven's highest law. The Pandava kings are nearest to my soul, and Draupadi's joining the bond completes it. Be one with me and I am one with you!'"

Vikram sat up in awe. "So it is right for a woman to belong to five men?"

"Not for all. That is how I understood Dadi. For us ordinary people it is sin. But for those as pure as Queen Draupadi, those who are nearest to Lord Krishna, it may be right."

"I do not understand, even after thou hast explained what Dadi said. Every woman belongs to her man, and to him only. That is what we feel, that is the law. Is it not so?"

"It is, my lord."

"Now we must sleep. It is nearly morning. And thou art my good woman, my sweet woman. All thy ribs shall again be clothed as they were—this and this——"

They did not talk more, nor did they hear the wailing of the cow, piercing at times, at others low and weak.

V

THERE ARE MORE PEOPLE HERE THAN EVEN YESTERDAY OR THE DAY before," said Vikram to Rameshwar. It was the third night of the play, and they were taking their seats among the other young men who, as was befitting, sat in front under the vigilant eyes of their elders, so as not to trespass by word or look upon the women's side.

"There are also more camp-fires than last night. Many carts have arrived only to-day." Rameshwar pointed at the massive wall of carts, several rows deep, which surrounded the southern outskirts of Sitapur in a vast semicircle.

"Poor beggars! They missed two performances."

"Poor? Lucky they are. Their log fires are burning low. That means that these people from outside have eaten an evening meal. But we do not have one."

"They could not have had the locusts come down on them, or they could not have two meals a day. Ah, here are the lamps. One, two, three—the patel is doing things handsomely!"

"Three kerosene lamps on a full-moon night, when in any case we could see every bit of the performance as though it were day! He does well by us."

"After all, it's our money, isn't it?" said Rameshwar.

"It's his, even if we give it to him. He is the headman elected by the village, and can spend the money as he likes."

"No, he cannot, or at least he shouldn't. Dost thou not know about this, Brother? It is money from the fund he keeps for entertainment and charities—and we maintain the fund. Our dues to him are quite a different matter."

"So it's *our* kerosene, really!"

"Do not shout like that!" Lachchmaniya, behind the brothers, spoke good-naturedly. "If such talk is reported to the patel thou mightest find thyself soon in trouble."

Rameshwar and Vikram looked at each other, suddenly sober. The patel could indeed punish in his own right.

"He doesn't do so badly by us," continued Lachchmaniya. "He can distribute the fund at his pleasure. Out of it he can feed whom he likes, and he can provide entertainment or not. If he spends kerosene on us on a full-moon night he expects praise, not grumbling. Why grumble at all? Each one of us has a wife all to himself and, if she is unfaithful, we kill her or bite off her nose. The Pandava kings had to share their queen. One woman to five men! How on earth did they manage?"

"They took turns. She stayed one year in the palace of each, so we heard yesterday. And they must have had many other women besides."

"But it was she alone who was their queen. And four years each king had to live without her! How woulds't thou like that?"

"In our villages there are only our own women to use."

"If thou goest to Padminipur to the fair there are others, eh?"

"Tell us, Lachchmaniya, with how many women didst thou sleep across the Black Waters?"

"All of them of fair skin?"

"How does the barley taste after wheat?"

Vikram looked towards the women's side where Dulari sat among the young set. Praise be to the gods for her fair skin. Poor Lachchmaniya! With such a deep brown wife as his it

didn't matter whether one had her always or didn't see her for four years. But Dulari! That fairness, that softness—even now! Their midday gruel, their one and scanty meal, did not seem poor after their blessed nights.

"Here are the musicians. Four instead of yesterday's two!"

"Is there something special to-day?"

"Indeed there is! It's the denudation!"

"The what?"

"Dost thou not know the *Mahabharata*?"

"The denudation of Queen Draupadi."

"That cannot be! How would five husbands allow such a shameful thing?"

"Just wait. It's the fault of one of them."

"Here are the actors!"

"Again the Queen wears different clothes!"

The eight actors filed in, the kings taking the lead, and behind them two wearing women's garb. They represented Queen Draupadi and her mother-in-law, Queen Kunti. The costumes cried out in crude yellows, greens, and reds, except that of the old seeress-queen, which was blue. All were lavishly bedecked with tinsel and sequins of every kind, to denote royal status and splendour. The men wore mighty wooden swords painted silver. Black paint served for beards and moustaches, for actors must sacrifice their own beards in order to perform a variety of rôles. The make-up was daubs of white and red on chin and cheeks. Queen Draupadi, portrayed by a handsome, effeminate youth, had an extra coat of white and red paint to indicate ravishing beauty.

A bit of parched grass, with a background of two bamboo poles hung with thick white sheeting, was the stage. The musicians, sitting in a row at the left, did their best to drown conversation by their noise, and to attract the audience's attention.

"To-day we've got a second drum!"

"And a double-barrelled flute!"

"That means there is no dancing."

"Of course not. It's the denudation we shall see."

"What didst thou say? One can't hear one's own word."

"What is there to grumble about? The musicians show that they are worth their money."

The two drummers belaboured their double-sided instruments with both hands, following the lead of the ordinary bamboo flute that serves for every musical purpose, and of its nobler brother, the double-barrelled bamboo flute, whose music must never be used for dancing. The flute player, squatting on the ground, held one end of each flute in his mouth. The string that united the two flutes and the tassels that adorned them were of gay red and yellow.

"There! Now that they have King Draupadi as father-in-law and ally King Duryodhana must give back their kingdom to the Pandava brothers. Too long have his wiles kept them in exile already."

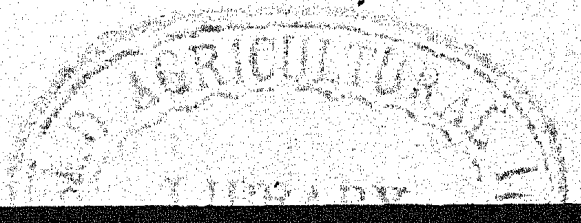
"Listen to the play! It is not thee we want to hear."

On the stage King Dharmaraja, the eldest of the five brothers, received back the Pandava kingdom from his sinister cousin, Duryodhana. Proudly he and his left the stage to return to their lands. But since there were but eight actors his exit was followed by only three brothers, instead of four, and the two queens. On the stage remained King Duryodhana who, torn by unholy desire for Draupadi, was already making plans to cheat the Pandavas out of their recovered kingdom. There was Dharmaraja's passion for gambling——

Dulari held her breath. Here were the five kings, happy at last after so many misfortunes, reigning again over their fair land, with Draupadi their queen and their saintly mother to guide them. How beautifully had she spoken about the blessing that Lord Krishna had bestowed on them! But the very moment the two queens were retiring for worship here came

the envoys of King Duryodhana. Whatever their errand, it could only mean harm. But King Dharmaraja did not seem to know, for all his glory and greatness. He accepted the invitation to a game of dice in his erstwhile foe's capital. Couldn't he see that he was courting danger? Would the wily Kurava king try to capture the Pandava brothers while they were at play? Nobody had ever been able to overpower them by force of arms, but now . . . A wave of apprehension went through Dulari. Why did the king not open his eyes? Poor Draupadi! Poor old queen! Women always had to suffer. Yet they knew better than their menfolk. Had the queens been present that accursed invitation would never have been accepted. Women knew if their beloved were in danger. Dulari knew if her dear lord was. Hadn't she rushed out all of a sudden the other day, just in time to see a panther ready to spring at him? Queen Draupadi would have known a thousand times better than she who was ignorant in all but her love. She would have stopped the evil messengers. But they had waited cunningly for her absence to deliver their invitation. Did nobody call back the two queens? Were none of the Pandava kings aware of pending disaster? Here again was King Duryodhana in his palace. How pleased he seemed by his messengers' tale! What did he say? For once Dulari pushed a nipple into Jiji's wailing mouth without remembering to press it beforehand. Why did the evil king laugh so much when ordering a second set of dice?

Mother nodded sadly, yet with satisfaction. She knew just as well as Mother-in-law, who had put all these useless tales into Shushila's head. Men were like that. Gambling and drink, that is what they were after, be they kings or peasants. Not that her own man was like that, praise be to the gods. He had never wanted any woman but herself, not even to this day, however bony and parched life had made her. His were other faults. His goodness made him weak. Look how he had refused to come to the play because of the cow. "I shall stay with her lest she



feel too lonely in her grief," he had said. Cow and brothers, brothers' wives and daughters, everybody came before him and his own. But otherwise there was nothing wrong with him. Look at other men! Wedding a second or third wife, gambling away the little money there was, just as that King Dharmaraja was about to do. . . . There he came, entering the plotting king's durbar hall, all the while talking to his brothers.

> "It is my old weak yielding to the lure of the dice
> That brought me here. Forgive me, brothers,
> That fortune thus I tempt. My royal word is given.
> Do help to keep it, for I cannot draw back."

That is what men always said. Everything to show off! Just like those lazy Rajput dogs who let their field go to waste because their foolish pride did not permit them to work as other folk did. Pride, always pride! That's why the four brothers now met King Dharmaraja's request, though they must have known better.

> "We are thy younger brothers. It is for thee to guide."
> "To serve thee is our freedom."
> "Thou art to us as God who walks this earth."
> "Lead, and we follow. This is what we ask."

There, that was male cleverness for you! Kings or no kings, these were downright fools. Instead of preventing their eldest brother from bringing calamity upon all of them! Gambling was wrong, be it in the *Mahabharata* or in village life. But here were they, encouraging him even! They should have made a stand . . . Mother stopped short in her thoughts. She herself had made a stand two days ago and failed. Her man had refused to see to Lajja's marriage. They were to live in sin, all because of her sister-in-law's daughters! He was not even here to talk to visitors who had flocked to Sitapur from other villages. What a chance to lose! Mother looked cautiously towards the men's side. Were there many strangers? Did any of them glance at Lajja? Oh, here was one. No, he was not a stranger. He was

the late Hamira's youngest son, a boy hardly sixteen. Well! Did Lajja glance back? A decent maiden shouldn't, or that was what she was told by elder women. But Mother knew. As a girl she, too, had tried to peep towards the men's side. Every girl did. Did Lajja and that boy have an understanding? No. She was looking straight at the stage, as fascinated as Shushila always was. All of a sudden Mother gave a gasp. It was Shushila who met the glance of the Hamira boy, Shushila, barely twelve! Calling her forcibly to order, Mother resolved to tell her off at home. What impudence, and what foolishness at the same time! The sons of Hamira would never allow a poor bride to enter their house.

On the stage, the Pandava kings had been duly welcomed by their hosts. Now the two royal gamblers faced each other.

"If thou art afraid
Thou need'st not touch the dice."

Afraid? A wave of indignation went through the young men. How can a Pandava king know fear? Let him teach his opponents a lesson. Strength and right always triumph in the end. Fear, indeed! Vikram heaved a sigh of relief at the Pandava king's haughty rejoinder.

"The game is on!
I am as good as thee,
Come, let us start!"

"What is the stake?"

"Our kingdoms' lands and wealth."

That was spoken like a true king! With Lord Krishna's help behind them, the Pandavas could afford to stake their all. Dharmaraja's courage put the other side to shame. Look how he threw the dice! Vikram craned his neck. How much—oh!

For a second all the actors seemed motionless. Sakuni, the winner, was the first to speak to the defeated king.

"What of a second throw? Art thou afraid?"

Dharmaraja drew himself up. "A Pandava afraid?"

"Then why not play again?
Though thou art without land
Much is still left to bet.
Against thyself, thy brothers, and thy queen—
I stake the Kuru kingdom
If thou art not afraid to take the bet."

The humiliated king shouted:

"Thou spokest true!
Their hearts and lives are mine.
I take thy bet!"

There! King Dharmaraja spoke as a true Pandava! He would make good his loss, would win the Kuravas' kingdom in addition to his own, would mercilessly drive them out for having taunted him. They were a bad lot. Be careful, King! Throw well! Lord Krishna is with thee!

Was it possible? Something almost a moan went through the audience. King Dharmaraja had lost again. Vikram could hardly take it in. It seemed a nightmare. What would now happen? Surely even the sinister Kuravas could not let the bet come true. Surely——

"Bring our latest slave!" King Duryodhana, a silent spectator until now, suddenly spoke. Evil joy showed in his face.

The latest slave? Until now there had been no mention of any slave. Who was this latest slave?

All at once people began to talk.

"Here is the Queen!"

"No longer is she one! Her crown is gone."

"He holds her by the hand!"

"Just like a slave! Her hair no longer plaited——"

"Her dress dishevelled——"

"Hush, the Queen speaks."

Draupadi, from the centre of the scene, besought the Kurava kings to obey the sacred laws.

But Duryodhana interrupted her roughly. "It is not for a slave to speak."

Draupadi raised herself proudly. "Who made this queen a slave?"

"Thy king—a slave now, just as thou.
He took my bet, and lost."

"My King and Lord!
Does this man speak the truth?"

Dharmaraja hid his face in shame. So did his brothers. Draupadi, thrown to the ground by her captor, looked straight in front of her, the cloud of her black hair screening her like a veil. At last she turned her head to King Duryodhana.

"If he is but a slave
How is he free to bet
And lose me, betting?"

But King Duryodhana would not listen.

"Silence, slave! The Pandavas and all their goods are mine
To do with as I please.
I shall soon make my own
Their palaces and lands, their jewels, gold, and swords.
Begin with what is here, the slave Draupadi.
O brother, go at once
And strip her of her dress."

Dussosana, having held the Queen's wrist all this time to heap insult upon insult, now started pulling at her garment. She wept. The dethroned kings, her husbands, bowed their heads deeply in shame, because they could not come to her rescue. Bound by Dharmaraja's royal bet, they were not free to fight.

"Does no one stand by me?
Is there no human help?
O Krishna, my dear lord,
Who mov'st in human form
On earth to help thy own
Or dwell'st in realms on high,

Thou art my only aid.
To thee now do I turn.
My love was always thine,
Thy guidance my soul's star.
O light of all the world!
O refuge of the wronged!
Let now thy love clothe me
To shield my purity."

Would Lord Krishna hear the beloved soul's outcry? Would he storm down to let the persecutors die by their own swords? The audience sat spellbound.

But nothing happened. Dussosana pulled at Draupadi's veil. The greatest desecration on earth was allowed to happen. A woman was touched by a man not her husband, a woman would soon be exposed to the gaze of all. Was evil to triumph? Dussosana pulled again.

Yet Draupadi did no longer look dejected. From the moment of her invocation she had expectantly looked up, full of love and hope, even while her garments were unfolded, and yard upon yard fell to the ground.

Dussosana complained:

"I never saw a cloth so long.
My arms do ache."

What was this? The folds of the regal red dress melted into yellow, then into green, blue, orange, purple, pink, and again red. Fold upon fold in all hues covered the ground while Dussosana, panting, worked away. The garment was apparently unending.

"Lord Krishna!"

"He adds what is pulled off!"

"His love is with her!"

"He shields her purity!"

"Do you hear his flute?"

The audience were whispering, shouting, crying, laughing.

Innocence had triumphed. The gods were near. Not always did the wronged remain unaided.

But Draupadi's troubles were not over yet. King Duryodhana was beside himself with fury and passion.

> " Thou art a witch! I see thy crafty wiles!
> Be thou mistress of earth's untold looms
> And colours bright, it will not help thee here!
> Come in my arms, thou slave who was a queen,
> And quench my thirst, here on this bed of veils."

He was about to make his evil words come true when his father, King Dhritarashtra, entered. The old king was apparently deeply moved by all that had happened, for he was talking to himself.

> " The seers have foretold for many years
> That Draupadi in all her purity
> Might be the flame to burn the Kuravas
> With all their evil ways.
> Yet though she may destroy my kingly house
> I shall now shield her, whom the gods protect."

Motioning his son away, King Dhritarashtra addressed himself to Draupadi.

> " Be without fear, O Queen.
> Thou hast met evil fate in this my house,
> I grieve that it was so.
> Now speak thy wish.
> I grant all that thou ask'st."

What would the Queen now say? Demand her captor's punishment? Ask for the return of the Pandava kingdom? No. She knew her duty as woman and wife. " The freedom of my lord is all I ask."

The old king nodded consent, whereupon the Pandava kings raised their heads. But Duryodhana turned to Sakuni, his face contorted with rage. " There! All our plans have led to naught! "

Sakuni alone seemed unperturbed.

"No man does change
And Dharmaraja is the fool he was."

The audience could not believe ears and eyes. Here was the trouble starting all over again! Sakuni provoked King Dharmaraja by taunting him with having got away lightly.

The King flared up. "I stake my all again!" Was it really possible? After all that had happened? He did not want to be beholden to those Kuravas. Vikram could understand that. But why another bet? Why did not the Pandava kings remember their swords, and slay the whole treacherous Kurava lot? Why all this talking and haggling? Did that rascal Sakuni accept? No, he didn't. He scorned King Dharmaraja's bet. But he was willing to gamble for twelve years' exile, and then one more year, either of the Pandavas or of the Kuravas. Why exile? Why not fight?

Could you believe it? In spite of all that had happened, here was King Dharmaraja, gambling anew! Dulari pressed her hand against her wildly beating heart. How could a king behave like that? Hardly had he and his recovered from the greatest disaster that ever befell human being. Lord Krishna's grace had saved them from worse than a thousand deaths. Should they not prostrate themselves in thankfulness and worship? Should not the Pandava kings look in awe and reverence to their queen, who had Lord Krishna's protection and love? But instead, Dharmaraja chose to gamble again, and again he lost. Oh, poor queen! Would the agony start all over again? No, this was exile, twelve years and one, thirteen in all. What did that mean? Had they to leave house and home? Could they take their children? Nobody had mentioned children, but the Queen must have borne many sons by now. She was not one to fail in her first duty. Surely they could take their children with them. Dulari, with Jiji safely in her arms, felt for Bhagwana and Gangu. Yes, here they were, nestling

against her side. Nobody could take them away. Nor did she need to go into exile. Their home was Sitapur. Here, near her, sat Mother-in-law, with Lajja, Shushila, and Kunti's daughters. Here, too, was Dadi. Among the men, over there, sat her dear lord. He was a good husband. He had not gambled her away. Soon she would lie in his arms. They need not leave their home, as the Pandava kings must. The soil was theirs. They were safe.

VI

BUT THE KUNWARANI HAS ASKED THREE TIMES FOR YOUR HONOUR'S visit! Before sunset it was the first time. Then she sent again, while Your Honour was having dinner."

"I know." Abhey Singh strode impatiently about the dressing-room of the rest-house where he had taken up residence for a few days' shooting. "No riding to-day. I shall walk. Just a shirt and pyjamas, that is all."

"What am I to say to the Kunwarani sahiba if she sends her attendants to ask where the Kunwar sahib has gone?"

"Say I have left for the villages. I have tax business to attend to. Say my father has sent me out."

"The Kunwarani sahiba will not believe me. She knows that the Thakur sahib's collector attends to tax business."

"Damn it, am I master in this house or am I not? I can go when and where I please, without having to account to anybody."

The old retainer, who had served Abhey Singh all his life in the double capacity of head servant and confidant, shook his head. "The Kunwarani is your wife, Kunwar Sahib. She is part of you."

"How much wast thou bribed to talk like that?"

The old Rajput drew himself up. "Bribed? I? Dost thou not know that thou art my all, that thou comest before my own sons and grandsons?"

"Of course I know. That's why thou shouldst know better than to talk to me like that, old friend." Abhey Singh strode out of the room into the coolness of the morning.

It did not pay to give in! On his return from England he should have put before his parents the alternative of agreeing to the bride he had chosen for himself or of losing him. He might have been able to break his father but his mother's tears had been stronger than his will. Or it might have been the old surroundings. It was easy to plan in Europe but difficult to carry out the plans in India. Here children did not stand up against their parents. They lost their personality if they had ever had any. They had no backbone. He had become like that, too.

Here he was, forced into a loveless marriage because Tej Kunwar of Jawalar would inherit lands bordering Badoli state. A fine reason to make your son marry against his will! No, that was not fair to Mother. Her motives had not been financial. It was his father who could never see enough land, never bank enough money. Both meant more to him than a son's happiness. True, Mother had been equally bent on marrying him off against his will, but in her such old-fashioned ways were understandable. She had in a way her right to them. A Hindu woman thought only in terms of sons and sons' sons. She had been taught this way. But Father had been given a fairly liberal Western education, first in the Chief College and then in his cavalry regiment in Central India. He ought to have known better. College or not, if either understood at all it was Mother, not Father. Did she not often look at him with those unfathomable eyes of hers as though she knew all his unhappiness? Why didn't she help him, then? Here he was married to Tej Kunwar, whom nobody liked, least of all her servants and her husband. Harshness, tears, scenes, petty selfishness—that was

what his marriage came to. What was the use of her shapely body? He did not want it. What is a body without soul?

If only he could get again to England, if only he could look into the clear blue eyes whose steadfast gaze a man could rely upon! But where was she? It was more than two years since her last letter had reached him. Was she married? Or had her letters been intercepted? Anything could happen to you in this country.

You need only look at the pitiless greyish-yellow of the landscape, unrelieved by trees or flowers or birds. A few die-hard shrubs were the only signs of life. It was a desert, just as his own heart was. There might be a cobra or a viper gliding about in the greyishness, or a panther ready to spring. That was in his own heart, too, only there was no prey.

It was a long time before he realized that a change had come over the lifelessness of the landscape. There was movement, born from the soil, one with it. He became aware of an approaching figure. Gradually his thoughts returned to his surroundings. Here, at last, was a patch of colour! Why, this was a man! Bowed, yet sturdy, the peasant in his greyish homespun cotton seemed one with the merciless expanse of sand.

The old man was carrying on his head a large brass pot, worn and dented but highly polished.

"Where dost thou go, old man?"

"I go, O my son, to sell ghi."

Sell ghi? Had the man so many heads of cattle as to be able to sell the contents of such a large vessel? Or was he without children? No peasant sold ghi if there were children and nursing mothers in his house, unless he was greedy for money. In spite of himself Abhey Singh grew interested.

"Dost thou want to hoard money, to gild thy grave with gold?" He was conscious of having made a very rude remark. Even a Christian or a Muslim would resent it. How much more so must the Hindu, who knows cremation but no grave?

The old man swallowed hard. There were tears in his eyes and in his voice when he spoke, as though to himself.

"Gold? Gold I have never seen. Kings' crowns are made of it and queens' bracelets. These two hands of mine have worked hard all my life, but they never have held more than brass."

These fellows always complained! Abhey Sing's impatience had not left him. He fairly barked his next question.

"Why sell this ghi, then? Why not feed it to thy family?"

"It is more than a year since ghi was eaten in my house. We have to sell it all to pay taxes and moneylenders. I wish I could feed it to women and children, but times are too hard for that."

"Where, then, dost thou go, old man? This path does not lead to a moneylender. What is thy village?"

"Sitapur."

"But that is very far away! How hast thou wandered here?"

"It is three days and three nights since I left home. I have to carry these old bones of mine to many more places before I can go home?"

"Why not sell thy ghi in the first village and return home?"

"I must first find the calf."

"What calf?"

"The calf for my cow."

"Has not thy cow a calf?"

"She had. But the worm took it from her a few days ago. Since then she cannot find peace."

"If thou art to buy a calf to comfort thy cow, will not the new calf's mother be without peace?"

"She would. That is why I go from village to village to search for a calf whose mother is dead. Then both the motherless calf and the childless cow will be happy."

Was it possible that this miserable man could mean what he said? How could a man hard-pressed for money exchange his ghi for a calf, merely to comfort his cow? Either the man was a saint or a fake.

"I might be able to help thee. How much dost thou ask for the ghi?"

"Eight annas per seer."

"I will give thee double the amount. Come with me."

Followed by the old man, Abhey Singh retraced his steps to the rest-house. Leaving the peasant in the courtyard he called one of his younger servants.

"Here is money. Pay the old man outside for his ghi at the rate of one rupee per seer. Make sure that he gets food. When he leaves follow him. Don't let him out of thy sight. I want to know where he goes and what his errand is. Only when he turns home to Sitapur art thou to leave him and report to me."

"How long am I to stay with him, Kunwar Sahib?"

"Until he goes home. Here is money for thyself, take also food for a few days. I want to know where he goes and what he buys or sells. I want to know every movement of his from the time he leaves this house onward. Keep a record of all he does and report faithfully."

Not until four days later did the servant return. He made a bedraggled picture as he entered his master's room.

"A broken reed I am, Kunwar Sahib! Footsore, my shoes worn out from all the walking I had to do. Not even at night could I rest. That old fool went on and on with hardly any sleep."

"What was his errand?"

"He must be crazy. He asked for a thing nobody apparently had."

"What was the thing?"

"Never have I heard the like! He asked for a calf whose mother had died."

It took Abhey Singh a few moments to recover his breath.

"Did he get the calf?"

"He did, late last night. And at once he set out homeward."

Abhey Singh looked out towards Sitapur. There lay the desert. But no longer was it grey.

PART FOUR

I

THE COLD WAS INTENSE. NOW AT SEVEN O'CLOCK IN THE MORNING the chilly desert winds had abated, but there was no sign yet in the air of midday warmth. There had been no morning gruel to-day, and Shanti and Kunti's daughters and little Bhagwana jumped up and down to keep themselves warm. Their only winter garment, a homespun cotton vest reaching down to the navel and wide open at the neck, could not protect them. Breathing on their hands or folding them under their armpits, they jumped about the courtyard shouting to each other.

"Stop that noise!" Dadi appeared in the doorway. "Don't you children know that to-day is sacred?"

"What is sacred, Dadi?" One of Kunti's little girls ventured the question. Shanti snorted disdainfully. She was grown up and she knew well the meaning of the sacred day. But the others were so stupid.

Dadi drew the little questioner near her. "To-day we prepare for to-morrow's sowing. A great day it is, Great-granddaughter—the greatest of all. The soil awaits its food. So we must cleanse the house, the vessels, tools, and cots, the bodies, and the minds. That is why you can't romp about like colts."

"But it is cold, Dadi! And we are hungry!"

"Why was there no gruel this morning, Dadi? My belly is filled with chilly wind."

"To-day is a day of fasting. The men do not work, the

women prepare the house and go to the temple. Good girls can go too."

"Shall we take sugar wafers to the temple as we did last year?" Shanti was proud of her memory. "And grain and vermilion?"

"Only if you are good and do not disturb the day."

"Shall we never again have a meal, not to-morrow, not to-night, not at midday?" asked Kunti's youngest daughter.

Dadi smiled. "There will be plenty of food to-morrow, and to-night you will feed on sugar wafers and sweet gruel."

"Enough for all?"

"There will be enough. Now don't break the day's peace with noise. Go to the fields. Shanti, see that the little ones behave as they should. Thou art a grown-up woman already. Thy mother and I can trust thee."

"Where are we going, Auntie?" Bhagwana tugged at Shanti's hand while they passed field after field.

"Thou little idiot! We go to the big field that has been ploughed, the one that will be sown to-morrow morning. See—there are our fathers and uncles. Keep quiet; we must not disturb them."

"Good work we did." For once Elder Uncle looked satisfied. "There isn't an inch of earth not turned over by the plough."

Each man knew of his share in the work of the last days. The field had been ploughed and reploughed. Furrow after furrow had been laid, each almost touching its neighbour. Then the criss-cross work had begun. Furrow after furrow had been laid across the previous pattern. Although each of the men had done his share of the ploughing, they had kept steadily to the same depth. Their touch was unerring. Without opening their eyes they knew to an inch from the impact of the iron-shod plough-head how deep they were.

After the preparation of the soil came the difficult task—the diagonal ploughing, reaching six inches deeper. Much longer

did this work take than the shallow plough of the first days. But when the last diagonal furrow had been drawn, the whole field lay open to the sky. Elder Uncle was right. There was not an inch that hadn't been turned over!

"I will take over this time!" Vikram felt it both his due and his duty to look after the fields at night from now until harvest time. He skipped the job more than once, for he had not wanted to spend the nights away from Dulari. After all, there were the uncles and their eldest sons, in addition to Father and Rameshwar. But during the last days while breaking open the field at his feet, he had thought much. Never before had he felt so strong an appeal coming from the soil that bore his own imprint. It was he who had drawn most of the deep-reaching diagonal furrows, always knowing when a piece of stone endangered plough or hoofs. There had been no accident. He was proud of his work, and he wanted to shield it, to look after it himself. And he would still have Dulari. True, staying out at nights and sleeping [illegible] home in the daytime did not imply that Dulari and he could be together. She had her own work to do. Moreover, it was not fitting for husband and wife to be together during the daytime. But Dulari would be able to steal out to the fields in the early part of the night without being reproved by Mother or Dadi.

"This is where I want to build my watch-tower." The site which Vikram had selected was but a few yards away from last year's. A watch-tower had to be where you could overlook all the fields. Shoots and crops were precious and must not be exposed to nightly ravages from pigs, deer, rabbits, hyenas, or their own cattle let loose. For generations father, son, and son's son had built their watch-towers here. Yet it pleased Vikram to deviate a few feet from the ancestral spot. His choice might prove better for observation, and others might use the site after him.

"Where is the spot?" Elder Uncle's eldest son was interested.

"Over here. Come, let us get the poles and rafters."

The watch-tower had to be dismantled after each harvest. Its four ten-foot bamboo poles and the rafters that made the platform were kept in the courtyard. But the thatched roof must be made anew each time.

The young men went towards the houses while the elders remained on the field. Elder and Younger Uncle went here and there, taking up bits of soil and crumbling them in their fingers to see whether it was really well broken. During the three days after ploughing—when the soil had lain open to the sky—stones, shrubs, creepers, and weeds had been carefully removed lest they should hamper the growth of the wheat. The men knew well that everything was safe, yet once more they wanted to make sure. Younger Uncle squatted on the ground, smoking his hookah. After the death of his first wife he had wed another not long ago. So far she tried to please him. Life was good. Let the elder brothers worry about fields and harvests!

Father kept to himself. . . . There lay the field. Every impediment had been removed. The soil was smooth as flour well milled. Three full days had it lain open to the sky. Sun, the begetter, had with his strength permeated earth, the womb. Heaven had come to earth. Would the soil respond? Would earth rise heavenward in the plants? Would his sowing bear fruit? Was he doing for his soil all he could?

There was water. Not yet had he a well of his own. He still denied the soil. True, when the first wheat shoots showed through he could use the risaldar's well for irrigation. But with a well of his own he could give his soil more water. In his own right, at his own free will, would he be able to water his fields, reclaim fields that were encroached upon by the desert sands, and add to the bounty of the others. The well . . .

It was not his fault. The gods knew that. Yet it was he who denied his soil.

With a sigh Father looked up. His hands were bound by poverty. He could not fulfil his duty. Let the heavens make

up for his deficiencies. Let the rays of the sun, whom he would greet to-morrow before the sowing, enrich in his radiance the soil so that in the union of heaven and earth there would be no lack. Let the gods in their mercy make up for human failings. There was poverty and there was oppression. There was no well and so not enough water. Yet there were the gods. They were stronger than man-made obstacles. To them he would entrust the seeds to-morrow.

Dulari looked round. Everything was clean. She had finished polishing the last brass vessels with yellow earth. They were gleaming like gold. Now it was time to go. As it fell to her to prepare the sweet gruel, she must take her bath before the other women. It was already two hours after noon.

Entering her little room, she took Jiji from the cot and laid her on the ground, tenderly wrapping her into an old veil that served as covering at night. How tiny and helpless she looked! Dulari was now longing for Jiji's wails of a few months ago. She would have loved to lull them, to comfort her little daughter, and bring a smile on her face. She would have loved even tears, too, but there were no tears. Quietly Jiji lay all day, either on her parents' cot or in her mother's arms. She had grown of late, for after the spring harvest Dulari's milk was no longer bluish. Yet there was no life in Jiji. Dadi's cures and spells and a visit to the Brahman had been of no avail. Jiji was only a girl but, in a way, the child of her sorrow was nearer to Dulari's heart than the sturdy sons of her pride. Her lord, too, had a strange tenderness for her who was but a daughter.

Voices from the house interrupted Dulari's thoughts. Who was she to waste time on a day like this? It had happened once or twice before. Kunti had drawn Mother's attention to it. Mother had spoken gently enough of the work that needed doing, and of young women looking into space without moving their hands. That must not happen again.

Dulari stripped the cot of whatever lay on it and carried it through the courtyard to the space that lay behind. Mother's and Father's cot was already there. Standing the cots against each other in a triangle with the wall of her room, to give her privacy, she fetched the earthen pitcher full of water that had stood in the sun all day. When she had brought it from the well in the early morning it had been ice cold. Now the chill was gone. Her last bath, a fortnight ago on the eve of the Festival of Lights, had not needed such precautions. But since then the weather had become much colder.

Taking off her veil, she draped it carefully over one cot with her backless bodice on top to weigh it down. She hung the wide skirt on the other cot. Covering her body with an old dhoti of Vikram's, for modesty, she squatted near the pitcher and unbraided her hair. With a small brass vessel she scooped water enough to moisten her hair, taking care not to waste a single drop of the precious liquid. Then, taking from an earthen pot green amli berries that had been soaking for twenty-four hours, she rubbed her scalp and hair with them. In better times, there would have been big and fragrant capers, that kept a woman's hair long and abundant and black to her dying day, even were she to live to ninety. But now capers must serve for food, and the green amli berries did well enough instead. Dulari preferred them to the soap-nuts which burned one's eyes like hell fire. Mother was good. Soap-nuts were cheaper, yet she had let Dulari have amli berries.

When the hair was washed and rinsed Dulari stretched out her feet and began to scrub them vigorously with water and the kiln-baked earthen sponge. Its surface, rough with tiny indentations, was better for scrubbing than the flat stones Dulari had known in her Govindpur childhood. When she had finished with feet and legs, she scrubbed her arms, smiling happily over the roundness that had come back to them. Like her feet, they were much darker than her body. Praise be to

the goddess for its fairness! Her man could never get enough of it.

Pulling down the dhoti to her waist, she scrubbed her chest and, more gently, her breasts. It was difficult to reach her back everywhere but she managed as best she could. How fresh and good it felt, to have washed one's body! Now she was eager to work. Rising to a stooping position, Dulari luxuriously took a final rinse. She might have saved that water. But she would go once more to the well with her pitcher.

Not before she slipped the skirt over her head did she let the wet dhoti glide to the ground. The body could not be exposed, even for a moment. Next followed veil and bodice.

After having taken her own cot back to the room and settled Jiji on it, she took the second cot into the house.

"Wilt thou come and help me with my hair, Sister?" she asked Lajja.

"Of course, Sister."

Asking Mother for permission to take the bottle of mustard oil, the two girls went to Dulari's room.

"How lovely thy hair is, Sister!" Lajja let the wooden comb glide through the black mane. "Why, it reaches nearly below thy knees! It must have grown lately. Mine is much shorter than thine."

"Thine is softer, Sister. It shines much brighter, even without oil." Dulari, replete with the joys of young wifehood, always tried to comfort Lajja, who had to waste her time, still unwed, with her maturity come on her more than a year ago. Lajja was good. Dulari could rely on her. It was to her she entrusted her children if she had to leave them out of sight. Lajja would not let them come to grief, and she would prevent Kunti from boxing their ears or even shouting at them.

"How is it that thy hair has grown, Sister?"

"I do not know. Maybe it is because Mother lets me have so much food on account of my suckling."

"I do not think it is that. Kunti gets just as much, and a lot besides on the sly! But hers doesn't grow, nor do males in her womb."

Dulari did not reply. In her wealth she did not want to make fun of women accursed with mere female offspring, even if it be Kunti. Instead she checked Lajja, who took oil freely from the bottle.

"Be more sparing, Sister. Many heads are to be oiled from this bottle to-day."

"Oh, there is lots more!"

"But we must save. The parents worry."

"Yet times are better now, since last spring's harvest."

"That is so. Nevertheless we must save. There is so much to pay off. There are the new seeds. And clothes"—her voice dropped—"and there is the well."

"The well! Shall we ever own it, Sister?"

"Of course we shall. It will be a good well, and our fields will rest content. Now I must go. It is time to prepare the sweet gruel."

"Who brings the sugar from the sweet-shop?"

"Mother said Shushila was to go. If she sends a smaller child much might vanish on the way home."

Both laughed. Children should be greedy. But when Dulari, from the doorstep, looked back at her daughter her heart contracted. During all that time Jiji had neither smiled nor moved.

Father was awake early. Because it was cold, he remained on his cot, counting the minutes until it was time to start the sowing. Yesterday he and all the men of the family had bathed in the village tank to purify their bodies. On their way back they had gone to ring the temple bell as an auspicious preparation for to-day's work. The younger lads had searched all about the tank to find some flowers, however shrivelled and withered, for an offering. But there had been none. November is not the

season for flowers. The last few had been used for the festival a fortnight earlier.

The field he was sowing with wheat to-day was his best. It lay in the centre of his land, not enough to the west to be reached by the ever-greedy desert sand, not enough to the south to take on the look of desolation that lay over the bordering Rajput fields, yet close enough to house and well to be kept watered. He always started with the good land in the centre. So had his fathers before him. Men must give of their best to the best soil. After the sowing of to-day's wheat the other fields would follow. Wheat and barley, gram and opium, tobacco, onions, carrots, chillies, garlic, and sesame for oil would take root in his land in the next few weeks.

Father preferred the period of sowing to any other. True, at harvest-time you knew where you were. If the gods had carried your crops through all dangers until then harvesting was a proud moment in a man's life. More often than not, however, it was full of heartbreak and regrets. Pests and animals, droughts and heat had taken their toll. You reaped from this field or that, but you could not help thinking how much more the soil would have borne you had not some handicap or other come in the way. That is what made harvesting a bitter-sweet experience, except in years especially favoured by the gods. But sowing was always beautiful. If you had prepared your field as you should your only task was to entrust the seed to the sun-impregnated soil and leave everything to the interplay of heaven and earth. Harvesting was a time of reckoning, sowing a time of hope and trust.

Father listened. There was already the chirping of sparrows and parakeets and the calling of partridges and quails. It was time to start. He had to be on the field while it was still dark.

Half an hour later the men of the family had assembled in the north-east corner of the field. The younger ones kept themselves apart, feeding the fire which they had lit on arrival. The

uncles stood near each other, but without talking. Father, who had brought with him the wheat in a cloth, now laid it reverently on the ground. As he stood near the precious seed his eyes were on the horizon over which the sun would rise.

Inky blue paled into grey. Grey melted into yellow. For a fleeting moment there was a greyish green in the sky that threw a cold silver reflection on the desert sands.

Green vanished. Orange and red gleams coloured the sky in those last moments of tensity and expectation. The flaming horizon painted the desert in all hues of mauve, while hollows and shallow canyons deepened into rust-brown or brick-red. The whole surface came to life. Little bramble-bushes and shrubs, dotting the background in misty blues, turned into a dark shadowy green nearer to the fire.

A veil of smoky haze became visible. Lingering between earth and sky, it enhanced the atmosphere of fleetingness that lay over both. As soon as the sun appeared the veil would dissolve.

The eastern sky was now a flaming sea of orange and red. Earth responded. Amidst the shaded fawns of fields and desert, the ploughed soil glowed in tints of richest brown. The colour was still. It was mute. Yet it spoke. The soil's expectation matched in intensity the flaming outburst above.

Father drew himself up, alert. His stoop was gone. It was as though he grew in height, as though he wanted to rise heaven-ward to meet the One he waited to welcome.

Here was the first gleam of the life-giving golden ball. Father took a step forward. Raising his folded hands towards the sun, he greeted Light, the Life-Giver.

Some of the other men followed him, some of the younger ones did not rise from the fire. Vikram stepped firmly behind his father to perform the greeting of the sun. He did not feel any particular reverence, but this was their field, the best of all. He had ploughed its diagonal furrows. He would take part in

to-day's sowing. He would watch over it in the months to come. If Father began the work by greeting the sun so would he.

Rameshwar and Youngest Uncle got ready the two oxen, each of which had the levelling beam attached to its yoke. One was brought to where Father stood. Father took up the cloth containing the wheat and slung it round his chest. Taking the tail in his left hand, he stepped on the beam. Then plunging his right hand into the pearly grains, he gently tugged at the tail. The ox started moving.

Those assembled broke out into a chorus: "Praise be to the Mother Earth!"

As he moved on, Father's right hand threw out the grain and his lips murmured, "Raise thyself up, grow thick by thy own might, O grain! Burst every vessel! The lightning in the heavens shall not destroy thee!

"When we invoke thee, God Grain, and thou dost listen, then do thou raise thyself up like the sky, be inexhaustible as the sea!

"Inexhaustible shall be those that attend to thee, inexhaustible thy heaps! They who give thee as a present shall be inexhaustible, they who eat thee shall be inexhaustible!"

On and on Father went, from one side of the field to the other.

Much later in the morning the others took their turns. But none left the field before the sowing was over and the ground well levelled. This was their sowing day.

II

WHAT IS THIS? JIJI! MY LITTLE DAUGHTER!" VIKRAM TOOK UP the child to hold it against him, to warm it, to give to it from his own vigorous life. But Jiji remained as lifeless in his arms as

when he had first seen her lying on the cot on his return from a night's vigil.

"Dulari! Mother! Dadi!" In his anguish and pain he shouted. "Come! Jiji is dying! My little daughter is dying."

Dulari was the first to reach her room. Seeing the lifeless form in Vikram's arms, she gave a piercing cry. "My child! Oh, my child!"

Furiously Vikram turned on her. "What mother art thou to let my daughter die untended, as though she were a rat! I spend my nights on the fields, thinking I can trust thee with looking after my children, but there thou goest, thou offspring of a demon, chatting and clattering about the house, while they die from sheer neglect!"

Dulari could not answer. Too much had fallen on her all at once. Jiji was going, Jiji the weak, the unpromising, yet so well beloved. And here was her dear lord, storming at her as though it were her own fault! Never before had he said to her a harsh word. Now he called her the offspring of a demon! What happiness could there be hereafter?

"Shame upon thee!" Dadi stepped between them. "A good wife and mother thy woman is, a better there could not be. Neglect, indeed! There are mothers, and many I have seen in my time, who would strangle a daughter at birth or let her die of starvation during the first days of her life, lest she be a burden to them later on. But thy Dulari has fed and held and cherished her little girl as though she were the most precious son of all."

"Yet here she is dying! Or is she not?"

"Dadi! Is there nothing thou canst do?" Dulari's voice came in a whisper

Sadly the old woman looked at Jiji's little face that lay against her father's muscular throat. "Many are the charms we have tried. We rid her from fever, the burning, the scorching. We sent it away, away from her, away from the house. We also

spoke the charm to give her strength, to make the sap that lives in plants and trees to rise in her, too. It was in vain. In her the sap of life would not arise."

"Thou didst more, Mother-in-law," Mother said. "Thou spokest the charm of the transmission of ailments. Whatever sickness Jiji had must then have left her. Thou also broughtst in the sacred herbs with whose help any demon is driven out."

"Is there nothing thou canst do now, Dadi?" Vikram said. "Look. She breathes! We might still save her."

Dadi did not reply. What use were words? She knew that Jiji had to go.

"Is there no medicine? Can I go for some herbs?" asked Lajja.

"No medicine. No herb. We have used all on her."

"But something to make her strong? Something that binds her to us, to our home, to the soil?" That was Father.

Dadi reflected. She knew that Jiji would soon go. It was the gods' will. But for the sake of the others she would make one more effort.

"Bring a pot of water," she said. "Also ghi and two handfuls of barley."

When these were brought Dadi put ghi into the water, which she then poured on the barley. Standing by Jiji, she began to chant:

"This barley did they plough vigorously, with yokes of eight and yokes of six. With it I drive off to a far distance the ailment from thy body.

"Downward blows the wind, downward burns the sun, downward the cow is milked: downward shall thy ailment pass!"

Dadi tied a few grains of the barley moistened with water and ghi into a bit of cloth which she hung round Jiji's neck. She sprinkled the child with water, while chanting the last words of the charm.

"The waters verily are healing, the waters drive away disease, the waters cure all disease. May the purifying waters with the uprising strength of barley make a remedy for thee!"

Nobody spoke. Jiji had moved a little at the touch of water. Now she was again motionless. Vikram could barely feel her breathing on his neck, lighter than any he had ever known. She breathed. She lived. Perhaps it was not too late. He would cradle her against him at night. He would give her of his own food the moment she was weaned. He would . . .

Jiji's little head dropped a few inches. Now she lay against her father's shoulder. But no longer did he feel her breathing.

III

SHALL WE NOT STOP WORKING? THE SUN IS VERY LOW." JAGDISH was muttering so that Father and the uncles should not overhear him.

"Idiot! That's just why. January is not June." Vikram felt himself very much the elder brother. "We must hurry in order to finish before dark."

"Why not go on to-morrow?"

"Dost thou not know? We can't get water on two consecutive days."

"But we pay water-tax to the risaldar! Why can't we get all the water we need as we always did?"

"Because they have reclaimed three more fields, those on the edge of the desert. So they need more water."

"I wish we had a well of our own!"

"So do we all."

"Shall we have one, Elder Brother?"

"Of course we shall. Soon! With harvests such as this——" Proudly Vikram looked round. Across the road were their own fields, in front of them those of the neighbour at whose well they were. Never had barley and wheat, gram and opium stood so splendidly. For once there had been enough rain, and every field in Sitapur was at its best. Even the lazy Rajputs had not been able to prevent theirs from blossoming.

All day long they had emptied bucket after bucket into the trough leading across the road to the main water artery that fed their fields. Work over, they would fill in the trough, opening it two or three days later when the well was again theirs to use. Jagdish lowered the leather bucket by the long, thick hempen rope that tied it to the yoke. Vikram drove the oxen down the slope, dug to match the well's depth. When the oxen had reached its foot the full bucket came to the surface.

Harya thane charaon re,
Haryani thare tain la-on re!
Green luscious grass to you I will give,
I will bring an excellent cow to be your wife!

Vikram sang lustily, with Jagdish at the rope joining in. Oxen needed an incentive to work, otherwise they would get bored, having again and again to draw the heavy bucket on their way down, to turn and to trudge up the slope. Oxen, like men, needed encouragement. All animals did. Look at the cow for whom Father had bought that little she-calf, after searching for it all over Rajistan! She was now happy. So was the calf. Both would give good milk for many a year. Man and beast need happiness, or at least contentment, to give their best. He knew that for himself. Dulari was now ill. Sometimes Mother made her sleep in the big house. Well, however that might be, here was more water to be drawn while daylight lasted. Here were the oxen. Age-old instinct rather than thought made Vikram accent the rhythm. Don't worry. Work, ye oxen. There is no need for you to worry. Green luscious grass to you

I will feed. Plenty, plenty. Only pull. Don't give way. As reward I shall bring an excellent cow for your wife.

Harya thane charaon re,
Haryani thare tain la-on re!

An hour later Jagdish drove the oxen home for feed and rest, while the cousins filled in the trough that crossed the road. After a wash at the well Vikram set out towards his watch-tower. Food would be sent out to him. There was no time to go home. Kispu had come running a little while ago to say that there were deer about. So they would be, curse them, with crops like this!

The main water artery, half a foot deep, ran at first west-north-west, bending sharply to the south in an acute angle. Within this angle stood the watch-tower. Except during droughts and pre-monsoon days the main artery always held water on which they drew to irrigate their fields in rotation. Each day they blocked up yesterday's diagonal trough, and guided the water into to-day's. The fields were thus divided into triangles.

Vikram looked round. It was always a pleasure to go along the main artery. Water was life. Inside the bend the central fields, the best they had, were planted with wheat. Now, at the end of January, it stood already four to five feet high. The outer folds on the leaves were just turning yellow. What a glorious sight was wheat, bending in the evening breeze, prostrating itself when the air spoke. Wheat was glorious; yet he preferred barley. Could there be anything more beautiful than the silvery green of barley-stems in their uprightness? They swayed in the breeze, but with all their grace and fragility they stood erect. No prostrating, no bending for them! That is how Bhagwana and Gangu should grow up, and all sons to come after them. Upright and strong like barley! That is how men should be. It was the same with food. Bread without barley was no bread. Wheat-eaters were soft, because there was nothing in their food to give them strength. How, then, could they be men? Good

bread was made of barley, corn, and gram in equal parts. Then only did you feel something between your teeth and in your belly. Such bread made men. Thick chappatis, with holes in the centre to let ghi soak in—could there be anything better? They hadn't much of it now, but after such bumper crops there would be no end of good food. Strange to think how, a bare year or so ago, he and Dulari had played their nightly game about this dish or that! Now her soft roundness had returned. Yet she was ill! Could things never be as a man wanted them?

Here was the watch-tower. With a few quick movements Vikram scaled the crude bamboo ladder.

Turning from north to west to south, his gaze ranged the expanse of barley from the road along the desert to the Rajput fields. While the wheat-fields were the kernel barley-fields were the shell surrounding them. You could rely on barley. It throve in bad spots, even on the borders of the desert or of Rajput desolation. Where its silvery green came to an end Vikram felt rather than saw the darker green of gram, already one and a half feet high. In a long triangle the gram-field reached from the middle of the Rajput fields to Hanuman's shrine. It was not Vikram's duty to guard these fields that lay near the houses, which were watched by the men of the whole family. The man on the tower was responsible for the others. But though the gram was not his concern, Vikram liked to look at it. What a friend that bushy little plant was to man! The white blossoms with their tinge of mauve were just turning into the pea-like fruit that tasted so delicious, whether fried in ghi or roasted in ashes. What tasted best, however, was a branch of gram taken right from the field and picked leisurely berry after berry. Gram-leaves made pleasant curries, and its stalks were hacked up for the fodder. Good old gram! There was never enough of it. That was why Father planted all that wide expanse with gram, leaving much less space for opium and tobacco.

Inside the semicircle of barley and gram the wheat-fields

seemed safe and contented in their first pale yellow. Beyond them, near the road, there was the leafy denseness of tobacco. Next came the lushness of opium bordering Younger Uncle's abode. Lovely whitish opium blossoms floated on a dark sea of leaves. Often Vikram would hold an opium blossom in his hand, wondering at its colour and texture. Was it because they reminded him of Dulari's skin? Had her skin gone darker of late? Or was he just imagining it?

The last rays of the setting sun lay over the opium-field, the onion and garlic patches, the dark green of the carrot-field, the green and scarlet chillies, and the sesame. They gilded the houses with their pretty frames of cucumbers, water-melons, and pumpkins that climbed over the walls and roofs. Now everything was still aflame with golden light. Now the greyness set in. Now——

"Here we are! Here is thy food, Elder Brother!" Kispu shouted.

We? Who came with Kispu? Once or twice Kunti had brought him his food during Dulari's illness. Well, it made a change for him. He liked to see a woman laugh. Yes, it was she. Even in the twilight there was no mistaking her graceful gait.

"I have not yet been on thy tower, Younger Brother. There are deer about. I should like to see them."

Well, if she wanted to come up . . . Kispu was with her—otherwise Mother would not have let her come. "Art thou not afraid to climb the ladder, Elder Sister?"

"No, Brother." Already she was swinging herself from one bamboo step to the other, though they were two feet apart.

How her anklets and bracelets tinkled! Like music. Like a soft breeze that touched one's body imperceptibly, yet setting it aglow with life and well-being. He liked that maroon veil of hers, with its yellow dots and purple piping. It set off her sparkling eyes.

"So this is thy platform, Brother!" Reaching down to take the pitcher of gruel from Kispu, she set it before Vikram with both hands. "Where can I see the deer?"

"What a question to ask!" Both brothers laughed in male superiority.

"I climbed this high to see the deer, didn't I?" Kunti's voice was soft.

"If deer stood in attention for thee to behold a watchman would have no work. The point is to detect the beasts, wherever they are."

"And then?" Kunti knew well enough, but men liked to shine. Let Vikram have his say. That gave her more time to savour his presence. If only she could get rid of that little rat of a Kispu!

Vikram good-naturedly fell into her trap. "See here? This is my sling. If there is a deer or a hyena I shoot pebbles at them. That is all. But first I must detect them."

Kunti moved on the platform and came near the unprotected edge.

"Take care!" Vikram drew close to her. He started to put his arm round her but checked himself in time. Bother women! Why had she come up here?

"Something is moving over there!" Kispu, longing for adult responsibility, was climbing down the ladder. "Do thou not shoot, Elder Brother! I shall find out first."

"How strong thou art!" said Kunti. "How very strong!"

Soft though they were, her words rang like a bell. And she was herself like a deer. But she was dark, darker than Dulari. Why was Dulari ill just now?

"How very strong——"

Had he heard the words or merely dreamed them? His ears grew hot. Here was the girl who before his marriage had been woman for his feasting eyes. Why did she——? Why didn't he—— Damn it! There was Dulari.

"Kispu! Little Brother!" He shouted. "Come back at once. Never mind the deer. Take Elder Sister home. It is late."

During the whole night Vikram was on the look-out with more than his usual vigilance. He must forget that visit, must forget that Sister was a woman. He must think of Dulari. He must watch the fields of the family. Never had they held more promise.

IV

IT WAS THE FIRST OF MARCH, AND IN A WEEK HARVESTING WAS TO begin.

The whole village felt in holiday mood. There were no rigid duties, work on the fields was over, all did what they wanted to do. Everybody was happy in those last days of expectation.

Women kept to the house. Now in the third hour after noon hardly any of them worked. Some examined their three-cornered winnowing-baskets lest they be found wanting when in use, but most slept or gossiped. There was so much work to look forward to: more food, more clothes, more trinkets, more marriages. With bumper crops, nothing seemed out of reach. Some of the younger girls broke into singing. Had some one asked them, they would have said that it was too early to think of harvesting, yet in the fullness of anticipation they sang harvest-songs, and others simply did not occur to them.

Boys slept under the shade of trees, splashed about in the tank, playing pranks, and lolled around the sweetshop. They tried to catch a glimpse of the three swords which a money-lender was displaying to a groom to be. They looked with envy and respect at the patel's son who, always affluent, bought kites for harvest flying and colours soon to be thrown at Holi, the spring festival.

In the morning men overhauled their implements. Though plough and yoke, rope and leather buckets were not needed for harvest, the few days between two working periods gave the time for such repairs. Tools and implements had seen hard work and had to be brought into shape for future use.

After the midday meal the men went to the fields, though there was no longer any work to do there. They walked about, appraising their crops. They squatted on the ground, passing the hookah from hand to hand. They planned for the future, thought of a second yoke of oxen, of a well of their own, of dowries provided, of taxes and interests paid. Careworn faces lost their tautness, eyes softened, burdens were lifted. All was well. This time the rains had not failed nor had pests disturbed the growing fields.

Never within living memory had the interplay of earth and heaven been so close. It was as though the soil had risen in gratitude towards Sun, the Begetter. Heaven had called and Earth had responded. Never had there been such crops.

It was on these that the hail-storm broke.

Over the desert the skies are rarely blue. They are grey. If light grey deepens into darker shades there is nothing unusual about it. People are used to so many tints. They know the purplish greyness of dawn and twilight, the mist-veiled yellow of sunrise and sunset, the bluish grey of afternoons. To them the grey is alive with shades and they can detect every hue of the rainbow behind its veil.

In that third hour after noon the sky had held but a hint of blue. Now, with the rising wind, it became overcast. There was a sudden drop in the temperature. But people were not alarmed. They were used to sand-storms.

The wind increased in strength, whirling up masses of desert sand. No longer was the horizon definable. Both land and sky looked as though they were made of sand and greyness.

People began to hurry. It was not good to be out in a sand-storm. This promised to be a bad one. The wind was turning into a gale, forming sand into wall-like sheets or revolving whirls. When the last stragglers reached their houses, they had hard work to get rid of the grit that blocked their eyes and ears, their mouths and nostrils.

Sandy grey changed into blackness. The sky was black. The earth was black. Between there was nothing but whirling sand, engulfing everything that came in its way. To human eyes it was as though the earth had risen sideways, lifting itself in rolls, folding up and coming over men.

But nobody was afraid. This was the familiar sand-storm, though on a bigger scale than usual. Here were the first drops of rain, relieving the tension in the atmosphere.

Very big drops of rain fell for a short time. Soon there would be more. People were waiting for the rhythm of falling rain.

But what they heard was a staccato splatter, abrupt, summary, decisive. The ground showed disks four inches in diameter. Hail had taken the place of rain.

It was only then that people realized what had befallen them. They stood rooted to the ground. They could not move but they did not stop thinking. They were alert in all their senses. But they could not take any action. Terror held them, terror of what this hail would bring.

Only the younger children did not realize what was at stake. They pointed excitedly at the hail-stones, some as small as marbles, some apple-sized, some much bigger. They wanted to run out and play with them. Their elder sisters and brothers checked them. Hail could kill. Among the smaller stones there was always a big one. Many a cow or ox had been struck down by hail. The elder children remembered as much and therefore held back the younger. So they took the place of their parents, who in terror of the future still could not move a limb. The adults were sightless and would have let their children run into

the hail, heedless of danger. Their minds were on their loss, busily spinning out its implications. Or they thought dumbly: It is of God that the hail-storm came. He sent it to us. What use in struggling? What can we do if it is He who willed it?

The hail cleared the sand-laden atmosphere. But there was not a trace of sunlight. An abject blackness lay over everything, a sunlessness that robbed the earth of colour. Green darkened into purple, fawn into brown, brown into black. Earth was left to herself.

Suddenly, just as it had begun, the hail-storm stopped. At one moment sheets of hail could still be seen. In the next they had disappeared.

The elder children no longer restrained their little brothers and sisters. Together they ran out to eat and drink the ice. To desert-dwellers water is the most precious of elements. None of it could be allowed to go to waste. What the children could not eat and drink they collected in buckets and pails, or in little heaps against some future use. Some took the last hail-stones to their favourite cow or calf. The younger ones could not understand why the cool stones that they clasped so firmly in their fists seemed to have melted away when they looked for them.

It was just as well that the children were thus occupied. For a little while longer they did not perceive the change in their familiar surroundings.

Now that the storm had ceased the earth took on a translucent whitish greyness. Gradually, with the melting of even the largest hail-stones, the shades of grey deepened into a vast interchange of colour. Everything was there, from filmiest misty grey to blue and black. The grey lay like an ashen curtain over sky and earth.

From this background forms and outlines began to appear. Colour came next. Green patches took their place in the people's field of vision. But it was not the green they knew. All lustre, all vitality had gone out of it. It was dead.

Contrasts began to show. Against the grey background rose the brown earth. There was the sodden mossy green of the tank, whose usually tranquil depths had been stirred up. There was the contrast between the slimy greyness of wet mud walls and the yellow-streaked black of the thatch.

Many of the mud houses were changed in structure, too. Walls had sunk, thatch had given way, huts tottered to one side. A strange deathly silence lay over the scene of desolation. For at least one hour there was no sound to be heard.

Then life bestirred itself. The first to recover were frogs and tadpoles. They began to croak. People who never gave them a thought began to notice the sounds, though still without thinking whence they came. A calf began to bleat, and then the goats. Even in these bleatings there was a sense of terror, of calamity.

Slowly people woke into speech, into the use of their limbs. But they could not yet speak coherently. They started a sentence without finishing it, and staggered about as though they were drunk. They took up this thing or that into their hands, only to drop it again. Features were still drawn, complexions ashen, eyes unseeing. Terror had not yet let go of hearts and minds.

Yet it was that very terror that drew people together. Nobody wanted to be alone. Women clung to each other. The most inimical sisters-in-law took each other's hands. Men formed into little groups. They seemed to want the company of others than their own kin. If father and son, brother and brother were left to one another, how could they avoid breaking down when they faced the terror in familiar eyes? Neighbour went with neighbour, Jat with Rajput or Muslim, everybody with friend or enemy.

Wherever those little groups of men went, to east and west, to north and south of the village, the same terror awaited them. All crops were flattened. Nothing was left of the silver-green

barley, the golden wheat, the deep green lushness of tobacco and opium. Onions, garlic, and chillies had disappeared. The cucumbers and melons climbing over walls and thatches had burst into nothingness. No creeper, no fruit was left. Over everything there lay destruction of a thoroughness that is possible only to nature.

The men were unable to speak. Abject despair took hold of them. What would the future be? No food, no fodder, no seed. What would happen to them and theirs? What would happen to the soil?

Among those men there were some who did not go home to sleep in their own houses. They would have felt caged, imprisoned there. A house was a place where you left your things and your family. A house could be used for stores and implements. But it was not home. Its destruction would not have mattered. There is no lasting worth in a thing you can easily rebuild with earth, gravel, and cow-dung.

In the fields, with the crops and the soil, there alone a man felt his real self.

Now the crops were gone. Without seeds there seemed no future for fields and soil. Wherever men looked there was only desolation. They felt bereft of home.

After the hail-storm life had gone.

V

PEASANTS IN RAJPUTANA DO NOT OWN GRANARIES OR HAY-LOFTS. They sell their produce at the first possible moment. It is not that they are not thrifty, that they would not like to have full granaries and chests. In self-protection they have to sell whatever they have as soon as they get it.

How can one keep grain for food? White ants and their tiny brown brothers know no mercy. What is grain to-day is a handful of dust to-morrow.

How can one keep seed for the soil? Human greed is worse than that of ants. Even if there were room for storing, even if stores could be protected from destruction, they would not remain with the peasant. Kamdar, surveyor, patel, or policeman would take them, and would not have to worry about pretexts. There were always tax arrears of some kind or other to use against peasants. There were arrears from serf-labour days. There were threats. There was torture. So there could not be any stores.

People kept enough food grain to last them into the new harvest. The poorer ones did not have even that. Always hard-pressed for money, at the time of reckoning they sold whatever they could, not keeping back enough to feed their household. They borrowed grain from the moneylender.

When the hail-storm broke most of the peasants had food for just one more week. Others, not so poor, could weather a few days more. None had more than three weeks' supply.

Now that the harvest had been ruined for everybody, beyond any previous experience, there were no reserves to fall back upon. Jat could not borrow from Jat, Rajput from Rajput, Muslim from Muslim, village from village.

So people turned to the moneylenders. They were used to the barter of crops and dairy produce against the seeds, sugar, soap-nuts, tools, or cash they needed during the year. Now, in their emergency, having no food or seeds, each and all turned to the moneylenders.

But village moneylenders do not own granaries either. Their usual storage is a hole dug in the ground adjoining the house and plastered with mud and cow-dung. That is all. In these holes they keep the stock of seeds needed for their village. They too are afraid of white and brown ants. They do not want to

store a pound above their actual needs. Each moneylender keeps enough seed grain for those who are his particular customers. He knows the size of their fields, as did his father before him. He can estimate each customer's needs almost to an ounce, and he keeps enough stock to satisfy all of them. But he keeps no more.

He, too, does not want surplus stock. What he sells to the city grain markets is his. What he keeps in his village may be taken away from him in one way or another. Lurking for ever in the background of his life is the greed of the ruler's envoys, the greed of the police, the greed of those who govern his own village. However judiciously he bribes them, he must be for ever on the alert, ready to adapt his estimates to ever-changing scales. To-day a man is mighty and it is wise to bribe him handsomely. To-morrow he may have fallen from the ruler's grace. It is an eternal struggle to keep abreast of changes in the positions of men.

The mighty and the mightier hold the moneylender in their hand. He cannot do without their tolerance. If they ask or threaten he must surrender. That is why he does not keep more stores than are necessary. The less there is, the better. Money can be hidden away in the jewels of his womenfolk, in the debts of villagers, in silent partnerships, in a relative's business here or there. Grain is tangible. It is within other people's reach, and it can be taken away easily. That is why moneylenders sell their surplus to the city as soon as harvest is over.

So the moneylenders are not ready for emergencies even with seed, and do not keep any grain for food. People live off their own fields. When after the hail-storm the peasants turned to the village moneylenders, there was no food to meet their demand, and even the stock of seed was far from enough for planting.

VI

THEY THOUGHT OF PLANTING FIRST. SOIL MATTERS MORE THAN FOOD.

This was March. Wells were drying up, and irrigation was no longer possible. Sowing could not start before August, when the monsoon rains would have wet the soil. More than four months before sowing! Less than two weeks before food would give out! Yet everybody asked for seed and not for food grain. The soil came first. It is the earth that gives men food.

The peasants wanted to make sure that in August they would have enough seed to sow their fields. This is what mattered. But the moneylenders, having little seed to meet the unprecedented demand, wanted to make as much money as possible.

In normal times the price of seed was about forty pounds to a rupee. Now they offered two pounds, and made each sale a favour.

At first the peasants could not believe their ears. Two pounds to the rupee! Who had ever heard of such an exorbitant price? Just now, when they needed seed so badly!

They clamoured and threatened, they entreated and promised. But they could not bring the price down. Two pounds of seed to the rupee it remained. And to those who remonstrated the moneylenders said that, on the morrow, the price would rise to one and a half pounds to the rupee.

There were those who brought their last bit of money, jealously hoarded against a wedding, a well, a new pair of oxen. With folded hands and tears in their eyes they begged for a less ruinous rate, but in vain.

Others who had no money to bring were met with impatient disdain. Who were they to waste the moneylenders' time? No money, no seed. Two pounds to the rupee.

Some of those who had no money were so desperate that the

moneylender could persuade them without too great difficulty to mortgage a field against the coveted seed. They argued that in better times the debt could be redeemed and the field revert to its owner. The peasants knew better. With interest compounded, the moneylender could be sure the owner would never recover his field. But what could they do? They had to choose between the loss of a field and seed for the remaining ones. They clenched their fists and bit their lips. They could not afford to anger the moneylender. He might withhold the precious grain from one who spoke too frankly.

But soon the moneylenders' scanty resources came to an end. Even at two pounds to the rupee there was no more seed to be had. What would they give their soil in August?

There were the towns. Not all the crops of Rajputana had been destroyed, only those of the south-east. With imports from the Punjab, the grain markets in the towns were as well stocked as ever. Bag stood near bag, and every kind of seed and food grain was obtainable. Prices had risen, as the townspeople wanted to make as big a profit as possible on the grain shortage in the stricken area. But grain there was, enough and to spare.

The hard-pressed peasants did not turn to the towns, but some of the village moneylenders did. When their stores of seeds were gone they replenished them in town. It was easy for them to do so, for they had credit and could buy without paying in either grain or money. They bought wheat at twenty-six or twenty-eight pounds to the rupee, and sold it at two to the rupee.

Why did not the peasants go to towns themselves? Why did they not buy seed at prices fourteen times more favourable than were offered them by their local moneylenders?

One reason might have been that the moneylenders had credit in the towns and they had not, and they had to pay on the spot in cash or kind.

But the real reason was different.

Jat peasants know through sad experience that the towns are evil, that it is not good for a man of the soil to deal with them at all. The peasant knows his local moneylender, just as before them their fathers knew each other. They know their faults and merits, the degree of their trustworthiness, their standing in the village. Above all, the moneylenders know the fields and their return. That is more important than anything. How can a man know another if he does not know his soil?

The local moneylender belongs to the village, to the peasant he is part of home. However hard he may be, the local moneylender is not treacherous. He insists on his advantage but he says so. With him you know where you are. If he were different he would not be able to live in his village. A skull is cracked open quickly.

The towns are different. There the peasant is a stranger. Nobody knows his background, his social standing, and his fields. He may be a respected member of the village panchayat or be despised by the community for some failing of thirty years' standing. Nobody in the town knows or cares. To the townspeople he is just a country lout, coarse, crude, ignorant of their thoughts and ways. They have no use for him, except to exploit his ignorance and fleece him. That is why Jat peasants no longer go to town.

Those who once did came back with heavy hearts and horrified minds. In their families and village they spread the tales of what had befallen them in town. They could not forget the lies, the deceit and treachery they had met. Towns were an abomination, places of crime and corruption, of vice and cruelty. Town dwellers went about in their fine silks and muslins, swollen with pride and conceit. They looked down on the villager because he wore coarse cotton, because he was ignorant of their soft and treacherous ways, because they could exploit him. But it was they who deserved contempt, not he. Townspeople were no men. They knew deceit and not courage. They seemed

pious, with all the sacred pictures in their houses that were for ever garlanded. But they tolerated vice in their town. They might even themselves visit prostitutes, and next day they would again stride about as though they were righteous men. There were no prostitutes in the villages, and there never would be. A man had his woman. If he suspected her of foul play he killed her. But he did not go with other women. Were he thought to misbehave, merely to be on the road to misbehaviour, he would lose his social standing in the village. He might even be made an outcast. In any case, to his last day he would not be able to live down the slur on his character. Trustworthiness and morality mattered in the village. In the towns they did not.

To the peasants their village seemed a blissful heaven compared to the treacherous and immoral ways of the towns. They would rather be cheated by their local moneylenders than put foot in such sinks of iniquity.

So it came about that not a single peasant went to the town for seed or food.

VII

THERE WAS NOTHING LEFT TO EAT. FAMINE SPREAD ITS BLACK WINGS.

Jat peasants are of a silent nature and cannot easily render their feelings in speech. But if their hearts are full to overflowing they break out in song.

That was what happened now all over the stricken land.

From the moneylender
I got some pounds of seed.
I took to him my last
So that the soil be fed.
But now I do not know which way to go.

The mother of my children says,
" Give grain for food, and don't keep it for seed,
The children starve."
What shall I do?
Go on to keep the seed for August sowing
Or feed my children and old father now?

*

A year ago
We were happy.
Wheat and grain and millet,
Maize and barley,
They filled the jars and bellies.
Now both are empty.

*

God the Maker
Does all.
From Him comes food,
From Him comes seed,
From Him comes famine.
We need not worry.
God the Maker
Does all.

*

We see much suffering.
The country is in poverty.
The jars are empty.
The cattle die.
There is no food.
The roaming tribes
Drift into the town,
But we stay
On our soil.

*

My little children ask for food;
They do not understand why there is none.
How can I explain to them what has happened?
They do not understand;
They ask for food.

*

Famine
Is bad.
The good old ways have gone.
No longer can a father protect the honour of his daughter.
No longer do children respect their parents.
Now a son will strike his mother.
He will disobey his father.
Famine
Is bad.

*

The morning wind is chilly.
It takes away my breath
Through starvation.
My body is weak.
It trembles.
I am hungry,
I cannot work.
I am hungry,
I cannot rest.
I am hungry,
I cannot talk.
I am hungry,
I cannot worship.

*

We all have forgotten
What work is.
The women do not cook,
The men do not tend their fields.
The cows give no milk.
The oxen stretch their limbs but rarely.
Nobody works.

*

God the Maker
Gave us soil.
God the Maker
Gave us children.
God the Maker
Will give us food.

VIII

WHEN THE NEWS OF THE FAMINE REACHED THE OUTSIDE WORLD measures were taken to send relief.

The rulers of the small states involved sent their men to buy grain for the famine victims. They did not grudge the expense. Some resolved to make the peasants repay them for their help after the next two harvests. Others did not go as far as to plan such action, though they could or would do nothing to prevent their envoys from enforcing it in due course. But, whatever might happen in the future, it was essential to help the sufferers now. They were potential taxpayers, part of their rulers' wealth. They had to be saved.

So the rulers gave funds to purchase grain for seed and food. But they did not themselves go to the grain markets. Hence it came about that not all the money they had given went actually for the purchase of grain. There were palms and pockets in the towns as well as in the palaces into which money went.

Charitable societies voted money or sent grain. So too did wealthy individuals, either out of benevolence or from the wish to win honour in the eyes of their fellow men. There is no greater merit than to feed the needy. Though the famine was but a limited one, a fair number of rich men decided to send grain. But much of their intended help did not even leave the grain markets. Or those who had been sent to buy the grain bought inferior qualities, while charging their employers with the price of good grain. Or the merchants who sold lowered the grade after the purchase, knowing that the purchasers would not care, especially if their palms were greased. After all, the grain was to go to this village or that, to peasant louts whom nobody knew anything about, to dumb and nameless people.

They could not remonstrate. They had no money to pay for good grain. This was charity, not business. The merchants, full of contempt for the peasants, kept their good grain for the towns and sent their trash to the famine area.

When the bullock-carts bringing relief reached the villages they found empty streets and lanes. Those among the men and elder children who felt strong enough to walk about were roaming the countryside in quest of shrubs or the like. Others, too weak to move, were stretched out in their houses or under trees. A few men had dragged themselves to their barren fields where they lay for hours or days, speechless, motionless. At times they opened their hands to take up some crumbs of soil. At times they put it to their cracked and parched lips.

But there were others to welcome the carts. There was the patel. There was the land-surveyor. There were the money-lenders. There were the police. There was the Brahman, whose temple had been well endowed with money by pious people. All of these, with their families and followers, looked well fed and strong. The famine had done no harm to them. On the contrary, they had become richer, and they were in good spirits. They entertained well those who came with the carts. They made fine dignified speeches in honour of both donors and envoys. They pledged their village's eternal gratitude for the help extended. They examined the grain, praised it, took it over. If in the course of the procedure half a cart of grain disappeared or sand was mixed into the remainder who could be held responsible? Not the welcoming party. They had taken what was handed to them. That was all. So of the scanty relief sent only a fraction reached the villagers.

Children and old people had died. Men had aged beyond recognition. Women would not survive their next childbed. Sons had turned against their fathers. Daughters had been married off hurriedly into bad homes, in order to have one mouth less in the house to feed. Cows had died, their carcasses

bringing food and strength to outcastes, but only grief to their peasant owners.

Now relief had come. But it came too late to prevent death and despair, agony and suffering. It came too late, too, to prevent the marriage of Lajja, who had been given to a man from outside who was in search of a wife for his widowed brother, forty years old.

IX

FATHER LOOKED UP FROM HIS FIELD. THREE—FIVE—EIGHT MEN? At this hour of the morning? It was mid-July. The monsoon rains had been bountiful and sowing could be good. Everybody was busy with preparations, whether he had seed or not. Why were the neighbours seeking him out in the daytime, when each had work to do?

When the men reached Father his clan had already gathered behind him—brothers, sons, and nephews.

"Hast thou heard, Hanuta? The kamdar will be here in a day or two."

"He has already been to Gokulpur and Bishmapur."

"How do you know?"

"A pilgrim at the dharamshala told me. He came from Govindpur last night."

"Was the kamdar looking at the destruction the hail brought to our fields?"

"What else can he do now? There are no taxes to wring from our misery."

"Thou art wrong. He wants taxes. That is why we have come, Brother Hanuta."

Vikram felt himself suddenly go limp. Taxes? Now? Had he heard aright?

"Art thou sure?" Father's voice sounded quiet. Too quiet, thought Vikram.

"I am. The kamdar goes from village to village, proclaiming that the sirdar has remitted or postponed taxes. There remains only one that must be paid—the land tax. To collect that he travels round."

"We cannot pay the tax."

The tenth of the estimated crops! It is madness. There are no crops. How can there be their tenth?"

"But he will make us pay the tax."

"How? Are we to cut open our bellies and pay in blood and entrails?"

Father raised his head. "What of the other villages? They cannot pay either. What did they do when the kamdar came?"

"The pilgrim did not speak much. Some villages paid. They were afraid of the kamdar's threats."

"How did they pay?"

"The moneylenders attached fields."

"My sister's son was in Govindpur for a funeral before the kamdar arrived. There he heard that he did not have his way everywhere. Some villages did not pay."

"Did the villagers rebel?"

"No. It was not the villagers who won the day. It was Sultana. He had followed the kamdar's trail and chased him out of Bornagar and Bishmapur. The peasants there did not have to pay."

"Sultana *ki jai*—long live Sultana!"

"He helps the peasants."

"He takes from the moneylenders to give to the poor."

"Even the sirdar is afraid of him."

"All kings of Rajistan are! How else can it be that nobody has caught him until now? There is a high price on his head. He and his men have done away with many moneylenders."

"But only if they played foul! Sultana does not want his men

to kill. When the very last is to be taken from a peasant then he comes. But he does not take life if he can help it."

"If only he would come to us!"

Father spoke again. "Are you sure that Bornagar and Bishmapur did not have to pay?"

"So my sister's son was told."

"It may be hearsay only."

"That is what I believe, too." The late Hamira's eldest son stepped forward. "We cannot go by such tales. The kamdar will come upon us in a day or two and will ask for the land tax. That we must face."

"We cannot pay!" They all spoke as though with one voice.

"This time he can't say that the crops are good!"

"Perhaps he will want to tax the few vegetables and cucumbers that now come up because their seed was buried by the hail."

"He will want to tax more than that." Father's face was grave.

Hamira's son nodded. That is why we come to thee. Thou art my father now that mine has been put to death. Thou art the father of all of us. Speak to the patel. He will listen to thee even if he does not to us. We must get him to use his influence with the kamdar. He must make him see that we cannot pay."

"Yes, act for us, giver of help!" Again they spoke together. "Thy word has weight."

Father's eyes had a wistful expression. "I wish it were so. My word did not have weight before." They knew well that he was thinking of the torn title-deed of four years ago.

"Thou art the one to speak for us. Everybody trusts thee."

Elder Uncle coughed. Why did none of the older men take the task upon himself? Or Hamira's son, who owned much more and better land than their own clan? Why did they lack the courage to act for themselves? They wanted Elder Brother to be the scapegoat. The patel might resent interference. Were

times not bad enough without taking such risks? Yet Elder Uncle could not do anything to stave off disaster. He could only cough meaningly. It would be unfitting to offer advice in public to the head of the clan.

Vikram saw Elder Uncle's obvious displeasure. That was just like him. Instead of being proud that the best men in Sitapur should honour Father! Most of them were richer than he, with better fields and more cattle. Father stood so high in the eyes of everybody that even the rich came to him for help. They loved him. They called him Father. Father was so steadfast, so wise, so patient. What a blessing to have such a father! Why did Elder Uncle not understand? He was quick enough to ferret out anything that could be of advantage, but now that the villagers were honouring Father he was displeased—jealous of Father.

"Wilt thou go with us to the patel?" The men pressed forward.

In one glance Father took in the warning expression on Younger Brother's face, the pleading of the villagers, Rameshwar's unconcern, Vikram's enthusiasm, and, beyond the fields, the house that held his woman and all the teeming life of children and grandchildren. Then, taking a deep breath, he dropped the clump of earth he was still holding. He seemed ready to move on. But something held him. As though remembering an unfulfilled task, he bent down reverently to smooth the clump of earth back into the texture of the field.

His hand lay on his earth while the men waited. Nobody dared interrupt his communion with the soil.

At last he rose. "Let us go, brothers. If we are united—if the whole village stands together—we may win."

"We are all behind thee! Thou art our helper, our refuge! Each will do thy bidding."

X

THOU WILT SPEAK TO THE KAMDAR?" IN FATHER'S VOICE WERE both tension and relief.

"I will." The patel nodded assent. "Present thy case, and I shall help thee."

"If thou wilt speak for us the kamdar will listen."

"I shall do my best." What would that best be? The patel was astonished at himself. Here he was, promising his help to the villagers. It was unthinkable to go against the sirdar's envoy, from whom he got wealth and protection, yet how could he deny the peasants' request? He knew what the hail-storm had done to them. He knew that they could not pay the tax. He had to live among them, could not make them enemies, certainly not now when they were desperate with hunger and worry. Look what had happened to the patel of Rangapur after the villagers had told Sultana about his doings! He shuddered to think of it. No, there was no other way than to humour the peasants and to promise what they wanted. Perhaps it would be best to meet the kamdar before he reached Sitapur. Then he could explain to him how the land lay and that, for appearances' sake, he would pretend to be in favour of the peasants' request. It would be wiser if the kamdar carried out the coercion by himself. The patel would have the moneylenders in readiness. When the kamdar commanded the land tax to be paid and the peasants stood with empty hands the moneylenders would step in. That would suit them well. He'd better require them to take him as partner on their dealings, with a few per cent above his usual rate.

"When is the kamdar due, Patel Sahib?"

"I don't know. Any time now, I should say."

"What is this shouting from the fields? Can it be he?"

But it was not the ruler's envoy. Wayfarers brought two bleeding, shouting men before the patel.

"They clubbed each other when we came upon them!"

"It was on Ramu's field. Kushala went against him."

"I did." Bleeding from a wound over his left eye, Kushala made again for Ramu. "He was with my wife, accursed be he into seven times seven generations!"

"Hold him back!" The patel ordered. "I will have no fighting in my presence. Behave, Kushala, or I will make thee. What is thy charge against Ramu?"

"He lies! He lies!" shouted Ramu, in spite of half his face being an apparent mess of raw flesh.

"Let Kushala speak. Thou wilt be heard later."

"He has been with my wife. My mother warned me before the hail-storm, when crops stood so high as to hide adulterers in the field. I thought it was only gossip, and I did not listen! I trusted the mother of my children, fool that I was. As though any woman could ever be trusted!"

"What happened then?"

"This morning he met her. For a long time they were together near the tank. My mother came out to the field to tell me. That is when I went for him. With the woman I shall deal later. But he will not escape me either, even if he is shielded here!"

"Silence! It is not for thee to dispense justice. Thou wilt do as thou art told." The patel looked stern. "The panchayat will decide whether they are guilty or not. I do not want such a low brawl to greet the kamdar. The matter must be brought to a close before he reaches Sitapur. Where there are five men assembled there is God. Wilt thou sit in, Hanuta—and thou—and here is the risaldar sahib, too!"

Father squatted down among the others. It was the first time he had been asked to join the panchayat. Elder Uncle's sour face melted into a smile. Vikram nearly burst with pride. Father

sat under the panchayat-tree on the platform reserved for the council of village elders. In ancient times it had consisted of five men only, as its very name implied. They enforced the village law of unwritten custom, looked after boundary problems, allotments of income and tax to each household, and the rare dealings of the self-contained village with the outside world. Within Father's and Grandfather's lifetime the council had been extended, at times including the head of every important clan in the village. Father's had been too poor and perhaps too unyielding to gain admission. Vikram sighed wistfully. What could you do without a well of your own? By now it would have been theirs had not the hail-storm destroyed that bumper crop. Now, in spite of their poverty, Father sat as a member of the council. One day he too would sit there. No, how could he? Rameshwar was the eldest. But any honour accorded to the head of the family brought credit to the whole clan. If Rameshwar sat on that coveted platform it would be enough. But would he ever sit there? He did not show much interest in such matters; indeed, of late he did not show interest in anything. The starvation diet had been harder on him than on any of the others. See how even now he was staring in front of him, without trace of pride. No wonder that Kunti—— No, he must not have such thoughts. She was his brother's wife. He had Dulari. Praise be to the gods that he had her. What was the patel saying? He must listen.

The patel opened the session. "We have already heard Kushala's side. He says that Ramu committed adultery with his wife. This is a very grave charge. What hast thou to answer, Ramu? "

" Kushala is a liar. By the life of my parents I swear that I never came near his wife."

" What about thy meeting her this morning? "

" That is a lie, too. I worked from before sunrise on my field. Ask the neighbours. They saw me working."

"Thou didst not leave thy field?"

"Oh—for a little while, yes."

"To go where?"

"To the tank. I wanted a bath. I felt hot."

Kushala shook his fists. "There, he says so himself, that demon! Hot he was, as the dog is after the bitch."

"Silence! Nobody gave thee leave to speak, Kushala. This is Ramu's turn. So thou wast hot and hadst a dip in the tank. Was Kushala's wife there, too?"

"No, she wasn't."

"Thou didst not see her at all?"

"No—yes—that is, I saw her from afar when I passed the temple of Lakshmi."

"Only from afar? Thou didst not talk to her under the trees near the tank?"

"I did—not talk." Ramu breathed heavily.

"Didst thou touch her?"

"No! I did not touch her."

"Is that the truth? Thou hast never touched Kushala's wife?"

"May the gods destroy me if I lie! It is the truth."

The patel turned to the elders. "Kushala and his people bear witness against him. We shall have to put him on trial. What say you?"

The risaldar cleared his throat. "I see no other way. We cannot have adultery in the village, not even the suspicion of it."

"Do you all agree to Ramu's being put on trial?"

Each of the elders gave his assent.

The patel motioned to the constable. "Bring the woman here. Tell her that she is bidden to appear before the panchayat on a charge of adultery with Ramu."

When the village constable set out on his errand both accuser and accused winced. The husband could not bear to see his

wife, the mother of his children, dragged before all these men, although he himself was bent on killing her. As to Ramu, the shame of the accusation and the forthcoming trial made him lower his head nearly to his knees. After this he would no longer be able to hold it up.

Again the patel addressed the elders. "Which is it to be? The greater trial?"

Again the risaldar cleared his throat. "Perhaps the lesser will be sufficient. Ramu may not be guilty."

"Perhaps not in deed. But he may have desired her——"

"He who gives but a single thought to another's wife is the greatest of sinners. We have always gone by that tenet."

"Yes, praise be to the gods, we live in decency."

"This is a village, not the sink of corruption that cities are. Here a man has his woman, but nobody else's."

"So shall it remain. I am for the greater trial."

"The lesser is bad enough."

"The big one sets a stronger example."

"Nobody will forget the lesser, either."

"Ramu was decent until now."

"It may be but women's talk."

"Maybe. Maybe not."

"Do all of you agree to the lesser test?"

Again each of the elders expressed assent.

"So be it. Ah, here she comes."

Across the brown soil the constable was coming. The figure behind him was so small that at first it seemed but a yellow speck. Jat women are usually tall and stately, but the build of Kushala's wife was that of a child. When at last she reached the assembled men, her red-dotted veil was drawn deep over her face so that nobody should see her. The hand that held it together was earth-stained. Obviously the policeman had not allowed her time to clean herself. Motionless she stood before the panchayat, a pathetic small figure in contrast to the tall

women of Kushala's clan who had followed. Women were not permitted anywhere near men's gatherings, let alone near the panchayat. So they stood at a fitting distance, to see, if not to hear, what would happen to their hated sister-in-law.

"Step nearer, woman." At the sound of the patel's voice, she seemed to shrink into herself. Then, slowly, reluctantly, she took one step forward.

"Nearer, close to the platform. Come forward, Ramu. Yes, here, close to the woman. Dost thou still maintain that thou hast not touched her?"

"I do."

"Then the trial must take its course. Bare one breast, woman."

The tiny figure began to tremble. She drew the yellow veil closer round her.

"Dost thou not hear? The panchayat commands thee. Do as thou art told. Bare one breast."

For one moment she swayed. She stood, alone, friendless, on trial for adultery. If only she could see a familiar face from her own village! No, better not. The shame was too great. Never again would she dare to behold a member of her own family—if she lived. But she would not live. Her lord would see to that.

"Well?"

Trembling, she pulled up the red bodice. Her left breast lay bare.

"Step forward, Ramu. Here stands Kushala's wife. Thou art accused of adultery with her. Dost thou still maintain that thou hast not been near her?"

"I do."

The patel raised his voice. "She is to thee as a mother, not as a wife?"

"She is."

"In token of it touch her breast with thy lips."

Spellbound the men looked on. Something almost a moan of

expectation filled the air. Would Ramu be able to stand this shame beyond words?

A shudder went through his lean frame. Then, with an effort that seemed superhuman, he stepped forward. With his arms folded behind him, his body recoiling as though the woman were scorching fire, his eyes closed, he touched the little breast with tightly drawn lips.

The spectators sighed audibly. Was it in relief or horror? For a man's dignity there could be no worse than to have to stand such trial.

"Sacred as a mother is she to thee! With thy lips thou hast sealed that motherhood. The panchayat bears witness that for ever she is to thee as a mother. Kushala, do not harm either him or her. There is no reason to do so."

The young men walked homeward in the wake of their elders. Between the fields of Hamira and the Rajputs Vikram asked the question that lay in the minds of all. "What is the greater trial? I never heard it mentioned before."

"Nor I."

"I seem to remember what it is," said Lachchmaniya, who had a few years more than the others. "There was a big trial before all of us were born. One night I overheard a talk between my grandfather and my father. It is a gruesome thing."

"Tell us, Lachchmaniya!"

"Do you remember old Gangu who lived outside the village, worse than an outcaste?"

"I do. He died when we were small boys."

"Nobody ever spoke to him."

"My grandfather told me to run away if I saw him."

"I often wondered what his crime had been."

"Crime? He did no more than Ramu—if either of them did anything at all. But he was made to stand the big trial."

"Tell us what the trial is."

"You thought to-day's trial bad enough, didn't you?"

"Well, wasn't it?"

"At the big one the woman has to stand with her legs apart for the man on trial to crawl through, in token that she is to him as the mother from whose womb he sprang. Under her skirt he has to crawl through! Is that shameful enough for you? That is what nobody can live down."

The older men, too, talked about the trial.

Elder Uncle was full of severity. "Punishments should be more severe! What happens to sinners like Ramu? Nothing. Why, this sort of leniency encourages young men to be after other men's wives!"

"His punishment is great enough," Father said. "No one will give him his daughter in marriage. His brothers and sisters, too, will remain unwed. His whole clan stands disgraced."

"Still there should be greater punishment."

"Wouldst thou have him in gaol?"

"Certainly. For a long time. In gaol he cannot commit adultery. And if a man knew there were many years of gaol ahead of him, he would be more careful of his actions."

"I wonder." The risaldar, who had been silent, sounded as though his thoughts had drifted far away.

"Dost thou not like the idea of gaol?" Father asked.

"Perhaps. In my army life I have seen much. In towns of big states and of British India there are law-courts and judges and lawyers and mountains of law-books. These law-books have to be studied and consulted all the time by all the judges and lawyers, just as people do it across the Black Waters. That system does not seem bad for the people across the Black Waters. They love to put everything into books. When they have to make decisions they open the books, there to find law

and action. By themselves and without books they would not know what to do. The judges are good people and really want to be just. They mean well. But——" Again his thoughts seemed to drift away.

"Tell us more! Thou hast seen so much we have not seen. We want to know thy thoughts about these strange doings of theirs."

"Well, the people across the Black Waters take pride in having the same right for everybody in their books. Often did my own colonel sahib explain this to me. Even after all these years I remember each of his words. 'If a man judges according to his own mind only he may fall into error. If he judges according to the law without being permitted to deviate from it he cannot err.' These were my colonel sahib's words, to explain why laws must be shut up in books. There are book-laws everywhere—in England, in France where my sons won their medals, and also in America, where my colonel sahib's mother came from."

"How could his father wed a woman not of his own land?"

"That is what people across the Black Waters often do."

"If they marry outside their country do they also marry outside their caste?"

"They have no caste."

"Are all of them outcastes, then?"

"For us, yes. Among themselves, no. They have no caste, so there is no outcaste."

"With all their riches, they have nobody to do scavenger work?"

"Poor as we are, we do not pollute ourselves like that."

"We don't have locks on our doors because here nobody steals. They do."

"Tell us more about these book-made laws."

"Most of all my colonel sahib talked about the laws of an old land—Rome. He said that the Roman laws were at the bottom

of all others. Across the Black Waters there is a law for each and everything. That is why courts and lawyers have so much work. Even the smallest thing they cannot decide for themselves. They must look for it in books. And then many scribes have to write it into many books, and on many sheets of paper besides."

"Does all this paper make them obey their laws?"

"Thou hast just said that, if a man knew he had many years of gaol ahead of him in case of sin, he would be more careful of his actions. For the people across the Black Waters it is certainly so. But this does not apply to Ramu or to any of us men of Hindustan, except those few who go by Western ways. Book-made laws in far-away towns do not mean anything to us, even if the judges there read in their books that they must send us to gaol. It is hard to be away from home and to live in gaol. But when we come back we are made welcome by the village. We have not lost face and honour by something which a book-law-court in the town decided. That is why gaol and law-courts do not prevent crimes among us. Their punishments mean very little. But what means much to us is our own village, the justice we dispense ourselves. We do not take it out of books. We have it in our hearts, it is sacred custom, from the days of Sri Ram. Of that justice we are afraid. To be cast out in one's own community is what a man dreads more than gaol, more than death. Therefore it is the panchayat law that keeps us from going astray. That is the law we people of Hindustan need."

"Yes, the old ways are better than new ones."

"The panchayat knows best."

"Where five men are assembled, there is God."

"The patel did well to-day."

"Indeed he did."

"If he will speak like that before the kamdar then everything will go well."

"He will. It is to his own advantage. As headman he must stand by the village."

There was no reply. Suddenly the men had become silent.

XI

THE KAMDAR ARRIVED LATE AT NIGHT AND IN BAD TEMPER. IN almost every village there had been trouble of some kind or other. Those confounded Jat dogs made life increasingly difficult for him. As though he liked his job of travelling round, always on the go, never allowed to enjoy home life in peace! That last young wife of his with her supple, silky limbs—had he been with her more than a score of nights? What had he married her for if not to enjoy her? He had given her handsome jewels and clothes, and there had been the wedding expenses, too. Now he was being cheated out of his due for weeks and months on end. Why could these accursed villagers not have the taxes ready when he came so that he could leave almost at once? But when had they ever behaved with propriety?

This time it was worse than ever. In every village they had forced him to make a fight in order to get the land tax. Fighting took time and strength. His health was not what it had been. There were days on which his stomach could not digest even his favourite dishes. At his age he should be able to take things easy for a change. The sirdar had said, "Don't be hard on my Jats. They have gone through much distress. Collect only the land tax and nothing else. This year we'll have to get along without the other taxes—from the famine areas. From all the others take all you can. They should be thankful that the hailstorm spared them." It was easy for the Thakur sahib to speak

like that, as though it were child's play to get even one tax! In the end the sirdar would come down on him for not bringing back enough money. In spite of his drastic measures, the returns had been unsatisfactory. Three villages had not paid at all. Sultana had hounded him out of two. The third he had avoided when he heard that Sultana lay in wait somewhere near it. What were those lazy police fellows paid for if they could not lay hands on the brigand? The whole of Rajistan stood in awe of him, and it was the thought of him that made the villagers so impudent.

"At which hour hast thou bidden the peasants to bring the tax?" Even after a night's rest and a sumptuous morning meal the kamdar spoke roughly to his host, the patel.

"At ten o'clock. They will be here soon. But your Honour remembers——"

"How badly thou didst thy duty? Yes, I remember."

"It was not my fault, O giver of bread."

"Silence. Here they come. Try to show thyself less of a blockhead than in the past. I shall hold thee responsible for any deficiency in the tax."

The kamdar took his place under the panchayat-tree. How lean these fellows looked! That meant that they would talk endlessly about the hailstorm and the famine. As though he didn't know all about it, as though he hadn't had enough trouble and less income because of this hail-storm of theirs! As though this insignificant famine deserved the name! Why, if there had been a real famine none of them would be here to worry him this day. He would show them. But first he had to smile and use friendly language. That is how the sirdar wanted things done.

"I am glad to be again among you, men of Sitapur. Doubly glad am I as the bearer of good tidings."

Vikram pricked up his ears. Perhaps the land tax also was remitted. Even the kamdar could not fail to realize how

desperate their poverty had become. Father would not have to fight after all.

" Torn by grief over your plight, our noble ruler, the Thakur sahib of Badoli, remits all the taxes you usually have to pay. Listen well. It is remission, not a postponement as in many of the neighbour states whose rulers are not as concerned for the welfare of their subjects as our great thakur sahib is. Are there words to describe such generosity? The taxes you cannot pay now are remitted for ever. Never will you be asked to pay them, however good your future harvests may be. You are indeed lucky to live under a ruler whose heart is full of love for his peasants."

No cheers? The kamdar's face turned purple. At this part of his speech the other villages had always cheered, however refractory they had become afterwards. Well, if they wanted it so he could leave out further soft speaking.

" Did you understand? Remission, not postponement."

" Our thakur sahib ki jai! "

At last! But not everybody joined.

" What about the land tax? "

The kamdar did not seem to hear the question. " There are no taxes to pay. No tax on water or wells or houses or grass or anything that grows wild. No labour for the Thakur sahib or me. Everything is remitted."

" The land tax, too? "

" You are no freeholders. Every inch of soil you stand on or cultivate belongs to the sirdar. The land tax cannot be remitted. Even our great ruler has not the power to remit that. It is laid down in the code of Manu and therefore is sacred. People of to-day cannot alter laws decreed by our saintly ancestors. The land tax stands. You, too, must know as much. Do you mean to say that you did not bring it with you? " The kamdar's voice conveyed both incredulity and threat.

There was no answer.

"How dare you appear empty-handed before me? You knew full well that I was coming to collect taxes. What you could not know was the remission of all but one. Can it be true that you have not brought even that much? Patel, can it be true? Does the village of Sitapur behave in such a shameful manner?"

To his great relief the patel was spared the answer. Father stepped forward.

"We do not behave in a shameful manner, Your Honour. Gladly would we give the land tax and more if only we could."

"Who art thou to speak before me? I remember thee as a liar. How darest thou contradict me who am speaking in the name of the Thakur sahib?"

"The others have chosen me to speak for all of us."

"There! This is proof enough. You knew why I was coming."

"Yes, we knew, Your Honour."

"Then why came you empty-handed?"

"We have nothing to bring. The hail-storm took our very all."

"That's what a fellow like thee would say. 'Our very all!' What of other villages in the stricken area? They are not better off than Sitapur. Yet they pay their land tax like men. They are not whining as you are. They do not want to cheat their king, to rob him of his dues which are laid down in the sacred scriptures."

"Nor do we."

"But you do. Whenever times are difficult you say that you cannot pay. What if the Thakur sahib had taken the same stand? When after the hail-storm his revenues dropped to almost nothing times were indeed difficult for him. All by himself he had to shoulder the heavy expenses for state and army. Could he not have left it at that? But in his unbounded generosity he took more and more burdens on himself. It was he who issued the order to feed the people. Vast sums were spent

on food and seed grain for you ungrateful rascals. I know what a huge amount it was, for many a time had I to travel to the grain markets for your sake. And now that I see you well fed through the bounty of your generous father, the ruler of our land, you dare stand before me denying even the one and only tax that is not in his power to remit. Dishonourable brood! Sitapur will stand disgraced for ever."

Vikram listened with mounting scorn. If only he could jump at the kamdar's throat and stop his lies. Skin and bones, that's what all of the peasants were! Dulari's softness had gone again. The children tottered about, too weak even for playing. Sometimes, thinking of little Jiji's death, he would break out in sweat for sheer terror. Fed, indeed! Eleven relief carts had reached the village, and no more. He knew, because whenever a cart had been sighted he had dragged himself out to meet it. Each had been but half full, and each contained more chaff than grain. If that was what the kamdar had bought in town with the Thakur sahib's money—— But what good could ever come from towns?

Father's face was working. Here was the moment for which he had prepared himself ever since the neighbours had asked for his intervention. If only he could find the right words to reach the kamdar's heart! So much depended on it—the future of men, women, and children, and the future of the soil. If he could not reach the kamdar's heart many fields might be taken from them. A lawful owner would no longer be able to care for his soil, and thus the soil would be denied. More even than the soil stood at stake. The village's honour had been questioned, and he had to speak for it.

"Your Honour, we do stand by our country and our ruler. We are not ungrateful, even if we cannot pay the land tax now. We own nothing but our hands—and even they are shaking from hunger. Death and illness have taken men and beast alike. Many a plough is now hauled by its owner, however weak he

may be, because his oxen have perished from lack of food. It is the same with cows. Only very few have survived." For a moment Father lost command of his voice. Had he not had to watch the slow starvation of the cow and the calf he himself had united? Somehow it was harder to see the suffering of animals than that of human beings. The look of those eyes! This time he had not been able to relieve his cow's suffering. Her moans after the death of the new calf were still in his ears. . . .

" There is no milk, no ghi. Nor are there vegetables to sell. There is even not enough seed for planting. We have nothing. That is why we cannot pay the tax. We ask for its remission with Your Honour's blessing. Is it not so, brothers? "

Some peasants mumbled assent. A few went even so far as to repeat the word remission. But when the kamdar looked up to identify the voices' owners those who had spoken hid behind their neighbours. It was better to be on the safe side.

The kamdar rose. His face bore a look of contempt. " Men of Sitapur, I am deeply ashamed of you. This is disloyalty of an ugly kind. But I shall be lenient. I am giving you one more chance. No punishment will follow the words I have just heard, although you deserve the worst. I will forget your disgraceful behaviour and shall not report it to the noble ruler whom you so forsake. To-morrow morning at eleven I shall be ready to accept the land tax from each of you."

" But——" Caution seemed brushed aside. Many voices spoke together, until a look on the kamdar's face silenced them.

The kamdar had had enough. What an effort it had been to keep his temper so far! There was no use in losing it, though. What he wanted was freedom to travel home, and he had devised a plan for getting the tax. To put it into action he had to get rid of this crowd of blockheads. " Silence. Get the land tax ready for to-morrow morning. If any comes without I shall teach him how disloyalty pays. Now away with you. I do not wish to see your accursed faces any longer."

Three hours after noon the kamdar sent for Father.

"Thou hast a good head on thy shoulders, Hanuta. I can see why the men of Sitapur trust thee. The patel, too, has praised thee highly."

What did this change of tune mean? Father wondered, his heart still heavy. Had the kamdar realized that they could not pay?

"Now let me see whether thou art worthy of that trust and praise. Thou carest for Sitapur, dost thou not, Hanuta?"

"I do indeed." Could the kamdar ever know how much?

"Thou wouldst do much to spare the village more misery?"

"Indeed I would."

"Then convince the men of Sitapur that the land tax must be paid. Do it for their sake. They listen to thee. They call thee Father, so I have heard. Prove that thou art a father to all of them."

"I wish I could, Your Honour."

"Thou canst. If thou makest them see reason much disaster can be avoided. For if they do not pay the tax I shall have to take severe measures. Really severe measures, such as none of you has ever known. Dost thou understand?"

Father did not reply. With eyes unseeing he gazed over the fields.

"Use thy influence, Hanuta. It is for everybody's best interest, including thine own. If thou wilt persuade the men of Sitapur to pay the land tax thine will be remitted. The others need not know, not even thine own kin. I will return the tax when we are alone. And some time or other there may be a field or two—one of thy neighbours to the south does not want to farm there any longer, so I hear."

Father drew himself up to his full height. "I will not listen to such dishonesty. Poor I may be, but I am no traitor."

"Thou wilt not speak for the land tax?"

"I will not."

"Then I will hold thee responsible for any failure. Take care!"

"We cannot pay the tax."

"You can full well, you lazy dogs. If to-morrow morning the land tax is not fully delivered I shall make an example of thee. I shall humiliate thee as never man was humiliated in Sitapur. Does this change thy mind?"

"How can it?" Father looked straight into the kamdar's eyes.

"I have given thee thy chance. Let us see whether to-morrow thou wilt not whine for mercy."

XII

AT ELEVEN O'CLOCK THE PEASANTS ARRIVED WITH EMPTY HANDS.

A few minutes later the kamdar turned to Father. "This is thy doing. Thou hast incited the village to rebellion. As a traitor to thy king thou deservest exemplary punishment. Thou wilt get it."

Why Father? Why only he? Had not the men of Sitapur proclaimed that they would stand behind their chosen leader? Had not the patel promised to speak for the village? Vikram looked from face to face. There was concern, fear, compassion. There was anger and hatred. But there was no one who spoke.

The kamdar motioned to two of the patel's men. "I want a stone. Pick it up right here. No, this one is too small. This one, too. I want one of about twenty seers. Yes, that is it. Now place it on the traitor's head. All of you can thus see what happens to one who stands up against his king."

Frozen into stillness, the crowd saw the stone placed on Father's head. For a second it seemed as though he would falter

under the cruel burden. But instantly he rallied. Squaring his shoulders, holding himself more erect than he had for years, Father even managed to hold his head high.

People were too stunned to speak. Vikram ran up to Father's side, followed by their whole clan, but before even the kamdar had time to order them back Father told them to go away. This was his test, his suffering. He did not want it to become theirs, too.

A few villagers began to mutter.

"This cannot be allowed."

"It is not his fault."

"It is we who asked him to speak."

"Let us take the stone from his head."

But the patel and his men stepped in. Posted in intervals so as to overhear every utterance, they were ready for the emergency.

"Leave the stone alone if you don't want it on your own head."

"There is nothing to be gained in going against the sirdar."

"He is the king! We must do what his envoy commands us."

"It is stupid to stand up against the state. Had Hanuta kept to that there would be no stone on his head."

The kamdar raised his voice. "Go now and get the money. The stone will not be removed from the traitor's head until the land tax is fully paid. His own clan have to pay double their amount. Hurry, if you want to find him still alive."

Father heard the words. He managed to smile, to show that he was all right and that people should not worry on account of him. But the protruding veins on both sides of his thin neck held their own message.

Men began to leave. Some hurried, to reach the money-lenders' houses as quickly as possible.

The moneylenders were at home. Owning no land, they were

not bidden to attend land-tax meetings. They were ready for the peasants, who now had to contract new debts at any cost.

Meanwhile the kamdar had retired into the patel's house. It was too hot to sit outside. The July midday sun was scorching, with no touch of breeze to relieve the stifling heat. There was no need to keep watch on the culprit. People enough were standing around, coming or going. While the head of a clan was at the moneylender's house, his brothers and sons, Rajputs, Jats, and Muslims alike, stayed near the culprit.

Father now seemed near the end of his strength. His legs were trembling, his face purple from the ordeal. But when Vikram and Younger Uncle came up, resolved to relieve him of his burden whatever the consequences, he again bade them to leave him alone.

It was then that Vikram realized for the first time in his life what suffering could mean. It was as though some unknown power gripped his heart and tore it asunder. Jiji's death had been nothing in comparison. To see Father at his age standing in the midday heat with the heavy stone on his head and not be able to help him! Father would not be able to stand the strain much longer. He would drop dead in front of all of them. Yet he did not permit any help. He preferred death to not shouldering his own burden. Oh, Father! Was there ever such greatness as his? If only he would allow his son to take the burden, if only he would live, every day of every future year Vikram would bring a gift to the temple in gratitude. O ye gods—let Father live! Were people returning with the land tax? Would they be in time? Anxiously Vikram's eyes scanned the lanes leading to the patel's house. So it came that at first he did not hear the clatter of far-away hoofs.

But others did.

One man pricked up his ears, and then another. One man smiled, another passed his arm around him. Eyes began to

shine, lips were unsealed. Heads were turned in one direction, where the clatter of hoofs became louder and louder.

In the moneylenders' houses business stopped abruptly. The peasant who had just renounced a field in order to obtain the land tax threw the money to the ground and hurried off. The moneylenders ran here and there to hide themselves. The kamdar came out of the patel's house, his face an ashen grey.

Down the village main street raced fourteen armed riders. Women and children, running from houses and fields, joined with their menfolk, and all shouted, " Sultana ki jai! "

" Sultana our rescuer! "

" Bringer of justice! "

" Father of the poor! "

" Sultana ki jai! "

Without stopping for the fraction of a second the riders galloped to the patel's maidan. Sultana led them. His big black eyes blazing above his bushy moustache, he saw in one glance what had happened.

" Leave at once! " he cried to the kamdar. " If thou art still here after five minutes thou wilt find a knife in thy back. And if thy master should plan reprisals on Sitapur tell him that there will be one for his back, too."

With incredible swiftness the kamdar turned and fled. A knife in the back for the sirdar's sake? He would tell the Thakur sahib that no man could be expected to work with Sultana after him. The capital was safe. Let the Thakur sahib look after the villages.

Father's face wore a radiant smile, so that people stared at him in awe and reverence. It was only after a few moments that they rushed to set him free.

Sultana intervened. " No, don't go near him. He himself will throw off the stone! "

Still wearing the radiant smile, Father raised his arms. The stone fell to the ground.

People went delirious. They shouted and danced, they embraced each other, they took the dust of Father's feet. They did the same to Sultana who still sat in the saddle.

"Sultana ki jai! Hanuta ki jai!"

"Let us take them out in procession!"

"Let us garland them!"

But Sultana signalled to his men. Each of them began to take out the silver rupees from various recesses: under his dhoti, in leather or gunny bags, in the cotton money-belt. Sultana directed that each peasant receive his share of the silver. His own belt he handed to Father.

"This money is only for improvements. Buy cattle and seed. Don't pay taxes of any kind. If ever I hear that you used it for taxes——"

He turned his horse, and followed by his men disappeared down the main street. For a time the clatter of hoofs could still be heard. Then there was silence.

Part Five

I

THERE WERE FIVE DHALS AND FOUR CURRIES, MOTHER! "

"And ten relishes! "

"And three kinds of halva! "

"Halva with silver leaf? " Dulari smiled at her excited sons. After all these years, even after having been fed halva with silver leaf on the births of Sita, Meeka, and Bishmaniya by her dear lord, she could not forget her old longing. To-day, at Shushila's wedding, the women of the family had eaten festive food, though naturally only a fraction of what the village caterer was serving to the men.

"With silver leaf. Lots and lots of it! The groom stuffed himself till I thought he'd burst." At nine Bhagwana felt already part of Sitapur's young male set. So he was against the bridegroom from Bishmapur as a matter of course.

Gangu, being but seven, kept his report to strictly tangible facts. "Mother, hot bread came quicker than you could eat it! And there were more curds than we have ever tasted. And I had four helpings of halva! "

"I hope thou didst behave properly. Thou art almost a man." Dadi, watching Dulari oil and comb her daughters' raven hair, tried to sound stern, but her twinkle betrayed her. She was picking over carefully a basket of wheat, discarding any grain that bore the slightest blemish.

"Grandmother smiled at me. Father patted me on the shoulder. So I must have behaved well. Mother, shall we eat

supper to-night? Mother, what is it? Why dost thou not speak?"

Dulari had dropped the comb to hide her face behind one arm.

"Thy mother cries for happiness, Great-grandson. She cannot forget the times of hunger and want that we went through. Is it not so, Granddaughter?"

"Indeed it is so, Dadi." Dulari showed a tear-stained face. "To hear my sons talk of five dhals and four curries and sweets! I can't forget how they looked with their bellies swollen with hunger and their little faces but eyes and bones. 'Mother, I am hungry! Mother, give me food!' they cried. And I had nothing to give them." Even at the recollection Dulari shuddered. Her eyes went to Baby Bishmaniya, who slept peacefully on the cot, and her hands felt for Sita and Meekla at her side. She wanted all her children round her, she wanted to see them secure and well fed, to feast her eyes upon their rounded cheeks. There were three who could not be there—Jiji the sweet, the unforgettable, and two stillborn babies, a son and a daughter. Famine had done that. How could she help thinking of those awful years? Two children who might have lived to be her pride and joy, and she had never even seen them.

"But now there is enough food and to spare. We shall have the well."

"When, Dadi?"

"After next harvest or the one to follow. This morning we paid Shushila's dowry, two hundred and seventy-one rupees in full. After that we have to pay wedding expenses, the priest and the caterer. And then we can start saving for the well."

"Will not the new kamdar sahib say to Grandfather, 'Pay taxes!'?" In his young life Gangu had already heard much about taxes and Grandfather and the kamdar.

"Tell him about the taxes, Granddaughter. He is old enough to know."

With shining eyes, Dulari raised her head. "There are no tax arrears, my son. We have paid everything."

"Aye, so we have." Dadi nodded with satisfaction. "It took us a long time. But now we have almost no debts to speak of."

"Tell us how it all happened, Mother. How did it come that we are now so rich when we were once so poor?"

"Since the famine crops have been good. There were no pests, either. There also was the dowry of Uncle Jagdish's wife. But, above all, it was Sultana's money that helped. With the silver he gave us we bought two heifers and a yoke of oxen."

"Now we have four cows and two yokes!"

"And two heifers and four calves!"

"And plenty of ghi and milk."

"How much money did Sultana Sahib give us to buy cattle with?"

"A hundred and one rupees." Dulari spoke reverently.

"A hundred and one? Would not a hundred have been enough?" Gangu asked.

"One hundred? Listen well, Great-grandson." Dadi sat bolt upright. "You others listen, too, and keep these my words for ever in your hearts. To give is a sacred privilege. It gains us merit in another life. Therefore, we bow in thanks if we can give. There is no limit to what gods bestow, nor does the soil grudge man what it brings forth. Both give infinitely. And when we give we have to do the same. Therefore, in our land of Hindustan we never make a gift that is finite, however poor we are. However small, however big the gift, we want to show that we do not limit it. So we never make a round sum. We do not count a ten or a twenty. We give eleven or twenty-one. For with the one rupee above each sum we say that we mean to give infinitely. The one rupee over is token that our giving is limitless. The soil and the gods give thus, and we humbly do it too."

When Dadi had ended even the smallest children remained quiet. Her voice held even those who could not yet understand her. Listening to Dadi, in whose words everything became clear, Dulari felt as though she could not do enough for her lord, his parents, his children, and the soil. She wanted to become a better wife and daughter than she was. There had been times in which her lord had complained that she was more of a mother than a wife. After Jiji's death and after the two stillborn babies, he resented her grief that showed in every action, every word. But could a mother be different?

That reminded her that Mother was now with Shushila and soon it would be time to ask whether she could be of use to them. Everything was ready—and so different from Lajja's poor and hurried wedding during the famine, with only one skirt, two veils, and two bodices to go with her. Eight big jars of water were awaiting the bridal bath. The washing woman would arrive soon to prepare the bride. Little Sister was lucky to be married in a time of plenty. Most of her trinkets were of oxidised silver. She was marrying the eldest son of a wealthy man, and her family had to give her the best trousseau they could afford, to match the groom's status. Mother and Dulari had printed and sewn four sets of clothes. There was a maroon skirt, printed in small and medium black circles, to match a red bodice with black piping and a veil printed so closely with intertwining red and black spirals that you could not see where the one colour began and the other ended. Dulari was proud of that print. She had drawn the designs in soap-stone on pieces of soft wood and carved them with a block of hard wood to serve as a chisel. Mother had helped with the printing. It needed evenness of touch, for even the slightest difference in hand pressure would betray itself and mar the whole work. In the past Mother had done everything herself. So it was a promotion for Dulari to be entrusted with the designs. It was also she who had edged the veil with red braid fully one and a

half inches wide. Mother did not trust Kunti with any work that was not for herself, because she might spoil it deliberately. There was a light blue outfit printed in maroon dots radiating from hand-sized splashes of deeper blue. There was another of delicate yellow leaves on russet ground, with shining yellow piping that spoke of wedded happiness. But what Dulari liked best was the green outfit sprinkled with russet marigold clusters, the russet bodice braided in green. It would bring out Little Sister's good looks. She had grown to be beautiful in addition to all her cleverness. Sometimes, however, there was a sadness in her eyes far beyond her years. Shushila had never known sorrow. She had not lost a child. Whence came this sad expression? Did she still think about that youngest son of Hamira because of whom Mother had scolded her after the Draupadi performance? When some years ago his elder brothers had married him off to a Gokulpur bride Little Sister had become very quiet.

Dulari felt her heart contract. Would Little Sister be happy on her wedding night in Bishmapur and afterwards as happy as she herself had been and was? No, that was not possible. Nobody equalled her dear lord. But Shushila had much to look forward to. Mother thought the groom good-looking. His family was highly respected and rich. Little Sister would hold the same position in Bishmapur as the risaldar's daughters-in-law held here. She deserved it much more than they did. How Dulari would miss her affection and her knowledge! The children would miss her too. She fascinated them with her tales from the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. Now that they all had to be careful not to let Dadi use her voice too much on account of her bad heart Shushila was the family's bard. Little Sita had already started repeating after her, though she was but three years old. Was it because she bore that sacred name? Would she grow up worthy of Queen Sita?

Dulari bent down and kissed her little daughter tenderly.

Then, not to be unjust in her maternal affection, she kissed the two babies, too, then Gangu. Bhagwana was too grown-up for kissing. But of him, her first-born son, she was proudest.

Many women took part in next morning's procession to the temple of Lord Krishna. It was cool and pleasant under the neems and pipul-trees that surrounded temple and tank. On their way home the women sang with renewed vigour the songs appropriate to the occasion :

"To-day
The bride is maiden.
To-night
She will be a woman.
Never again
A maid will she be.

"The groom
Goes in.
He does not think of the entrance.
If it is too small
For his armour
He pays no heed.
He just walks in."

To illustrate the male action some of the women took exaggerated strides. When the procession came to a halt the women crowded together, leaving a space in the centre for dancing. Song was not enough to express their feelings.

They made Mother the first to take the floor. At a wedding it is always the bride's mother who has to dance most. It is she who represents childhood and home, she who bore and raised the bride for this day.

In Rajputana dancing it is rhythm that counts. Foot- and arm-work are not studied or calculated. Agility and grace are natural, not acquired. Dance is a simple human expression based on impulse and emotion, and no two dancers dance alike.

As Mother moved to the beating of a double-sided oval drum, no man being about, there was no need to cover her face with her veil. She let herself go. She was the child that played harmlessly about house and yard, supping gruel, picking flowers, snuggling against calf and cow. She was the girl who prepared herself for marriage, churning, cooking, scouring, flailing, picking, spinning. She was the maiden, oiling and braiding her long hair, adorning it with flowers. She was the bride over whose head the bridal garments were slipped.

Elder Uncle's small wife now stepped into the ring. Twirling an imaginary moustache, she took the part of the groom. Another woman relieved Mother in the rôle of the bride. Question and answer began in reciprocal gestures.

The groom rested his right elbow in the palm of his left hand, boldly raising his right arm and hand upward, which is the gesture of the lingam.

The bride shrank back. The groom persisted, moving nearer to her. Again she withdrew, but now there was coyness as she winked at him from behind her fingers. He followed her closely, in swifter pursuit. She fled, but his persistence conquered. Sexual actions were revealed, though the dancers always had a space of several feet between them. The bride drew back her body in a way to depict the reception of a shock. The groom alternated the lingam gesture and the twirling of his moustache in token of potency and repeated action. The bride responded with renewed shrinking. Now both dancers were pausing for breath, following the accelerated rhythms of the drum. Exhausted they squatted down while the rest of the women took again to singing:

"Blood has flown.
Man is cruel,
Man is useless,
Pain he can inflict
But joy he cannot give."

Dulari, keeping herself in the background as befitted younger women, could not help smiling. Thanks be to the great goddess that the song was not true.

"This time we have done well by our daughter, Sita-rani."

The bridal procession had left an hour ago. Father had called Mother away from her household duties, a most unusual thing for a man to do. Together they had gone to the fields, by themselves. To-day and at this hour Father wanted to be with his wife instead of among brothers and sons as usual.

"Aye, a grand wedding we gave her, praise be to the gods."

"Poor Lajja! We couldn't give any to her."

"We even had no gruel in those days of famine."

"That is not what irks me. It is the man. We gave Lajja to a husband much more than twice her age, and a widower. That was wrong."

"What could we do? There was no food. And we had to marry her off. Fully fifteen she had grown, unwed."

"Yes, so it was. Well I remember how thou didst weep, here on this very spot. It was the day on which the worm took our calf."

"And thou broughtest another to comfort the cow."

"And both died during the famine."

"And now there are many others, just as there are more grandchildren."

"But Lajja's marriage remains. I cannot forget it, Sita-rani."

"She is not unhappy. Her lord treats her well, so she told me many a time when she visited us two years ago. She has good children, too, with two sons to bless her. Do not worry, my lord. We did our duty. It is a good action to marry off one's daughter. Soon we must think of Shanti. She always was our baby, but now she is already fourteen, and we must find her a husband."

"Fourteen! Does it not strike thee that Shushila is eighteen, and yet we have wedded her only now?"

"As though I had not thought of my unwed daughter day and night! Fourteen she was just when the famine was over. When she was fifteen I urged thee. But thou——"

"I had enough of one bad match. This time I wanted to make sure that my daughter would be happy."

"Thou didst take a long time over thy choice."

"So I did. First we had to pay our debts and save for a dowry. I wanted Shushila to enter a good family. I wanted to make sure that she would not be looked down upon as a pauper."

"When she was seventeen we had the dowry. There was a good match waiting for her. The Brahman approved. But thou didst draw back."

"Because the groom was nine years older than our daughter. That is too much difference. We did wrong once. The gods would not forgive a second time. For Shushila I wanted a young and handsome husband, the eldest son of a wealthy family."

"Thou hast got him for her, praise be to the great goddess."

"So it is. Now we can be happy. There is no hurry about Shanti. The gods will lead her to the right man. We may marry her into as good a family as Shushila's."

"That may well be. Thy praise is on everybody's lips since thou stoodest up to the old kamdar. Not many would refuse thy daughter." Mother looked proudly at her famous husband. Then, after making sure that nobody was about, she let her hand rest on his brow for a fleeting second. Husband and wife should never touch one another in the daytime. But this was the head which had borne the stone.

"Well, well!" Father smiled. "I don't mind marrying off the girls, but I couldn't spare thee. It is not true that young love is best. True love becomes stronger every day. Isn't it so, queen of my heart?"

Mother could not answer. She was too happy. If only——

Father gave words to her unspoken thought. "Shushila has a better start in life than any of us ever had. Let us pray to the gods that she will be as happy as we are."

"As happy!" On Mother's lips it sounded like prayer.

II

WHY DO I DREAD TO GO TO BISHMAPUR? WHY DO I GRUDGE EACH day that comes and wanes? Two moons have passed. Four more can I stay here in my beloved home. Then I must go to my lord's house. Why do I dread it so?

They showered me with gifts. They praised my looks, my trinkets, in the three days that I spent in their house. They all were kind, the parents and the sisters, the cousins, aunts, and friends. Why should I dread to go? I never was so fearful as a girl! . . .

When my lord came here to see me secretly I hid myself until he had gone away. The children told me how my brothers chased him, and I was glad. For had we met I could not have found words. When I tried to speak on those three mornings that I was with him he silenced me. He took me in his arms. He praised my body and took me in his arms again. But what I felt he did not want to know. . . .

To-morrow I must go. Six months are past. The home I do so love I have now lost for good. I want to cling to every hand and every rafter. I want to say: "Keep me always here—I am afraid to go to my lord's house." Instead I smile. My father and

my mother shall never know the blackness in my heart. A woman must obey her father's orders, her husband's, and her son's. Thus speaks the law. I shall not prove unworthy of all the love my parents gave to me. I shall obey, and every message that I shall send will speak of happiness. . . .

I wanted to take flowers to the temple. But my lord's mother said: "There is no feast, no need for thee to go. Thou grind the grain. Thy husband's sisters have the right to pleasure. Thy place is in the house." So I stay in. . . .

I wanted to take food to bards and actors. But my lord's mother said, "We give enough and times are bad. Hast thou not learned at home that thrift is woman's duty? Mend thy ways or I will make thee." Yet she is so rich. We were so poor at times but we gave always to man and beast. My home—oh, my dear home! . . .

While plastering the wall with dung-cakes I recited tales of Sita and of Ram. But my lord's father said, "It is not fitting for a woman to know the sacred texts. Leave that to Brahmans and to bards. But thou obey the orders of thy mother and thy lord. Bear sons and still more sons. That is enough."

I hid my tears and thoughts. But when my son was born there came a night when I spoke to my lord. I said I was his wife and he my man, that now we had a son and would have more that he should talk to me and I to him, that our thoughts should mingle. In response my lord first laughed, then pulled me by my plait, then ordered me to join him on the cot. That night he was much rougher than of old. When he had done he said, "This is thy place. Serve me each night, bear sons, and feed me well. That is what thou art for. Thy thinking keep to thyself, if a woman thinks at all. I want thy body. Thou art beautiful."

Oh, for the look my father gives my mother, so full of love! Does no one here want me, my feeling and myself?

III

IT IS THE DAY."

Father bowed with folded hands to the village priest.

"With thy blessing we shall succeed."

"You will. The constellations make it an auspicious day of the first order. The waters will flow towards thy well. Have the water-diviners found the spot already?"

"They have. We only waited to know which day to begin the digging."

With a happy smile Father turned towards home. How often had he not tramped this lane between Hamira's well-fed land and the desert-like desolation on the Rajput side! Each time he had thought of a well—a well of his own. At last it would be his. At last it would be his soil's.

Here was Hanuman's shrine. Like a wise and benevolent friend the Monkey King looked into space. Often in his troubles had Father derived strength from communing with the steadfast friend of Ram the King. To-day he could bring him good news —the best there was. Father raised his folded hands to his forehead. It was with deep gratitude that he greeted Hanuman the King, who stood guard over his fields.

He had declined the familiar company of brothers and sons on his visit to the temple. He had wanted to be alone to receive the great news. But now, seeing across the fields that the whole clan had gathered to await his return, he hurried towards them in long strides.

"The third day after this we start to dig! It is a day as auspicious as there can be."

There were broad smiles, joyful exclamations, cheering. Bhagwana and Gangu jumped up and down with excitement. Vikram clutched them, rather to feel their nearness than to curb

their exuberance. The well at last! He still thought of it as Dulari's well, even though the old kamdar had robbed them of her dowry.

"We must set out to borrow tools." Elder Uncle was full of satisfaction. "We have not enough."

"Of course not! Nobody has enough tools for digging."

"The neighbours always help."

"We need pickaxes and hoes."

"And basins to remove the earth."

"Shall we set out?" The sons were eager to go the rounds, spreading the glad tidings in their neighbours' houses, and the grandsons were eager to go with their fathers.

But Father intervened. "No. This time I and my brothers will go. There is work here for you to do. See to overhauling all our tools. Take bricks and mortar near the place of our well."

Even in thought nobody questioned Father's decisions. If so great an event were to take place it was befitting that the head of the clan himself should ask the neighbours' help, with only his own generation to accompany him. Sons and nephews could understand when they were told.

"Shall we go, Elder Brother?" Elder Uncle turned in the direction of the risaldar's house.

"Presently. First we must tell Mother. Praise be to the gods, they grant us the digging of the well while she is still with us. May they grant us water, too! All her life in this house she has hoped for it. When we despaired of ever having a well of our own it was she who gave us new courage, who spurred us on. Let all of us take her the news. Let all of us bring to her feet the first draught of water. Nobody shall drink before her."

"Nobody shall drink before Dadi! It is *her* well!" The smaller boys took up the cry, while men and children began to move towards the house.

They did not arrive unexpected.

Women and girls kept watchful eyes on their menfolk, at whatever task they were working. So Dadi was surrounded by all the women of the family when she stepped forth to meet her sons and grandsons and great-grandsons.

"In three days we dig thy well, Ma." Father took the dust off his mother's feet and put it on his head. The other men and boys followed his example.

"Not my well, Eldest Son. Not ours even. It is the earth to whom this well belongs."

"Without thee there would never be a well."

"Without the earth there would be none of us. She gives and does not count or grudge to humans, beasts, and plants. Her love never wanes. We eat her bread, we tread and use the soil as we do beasts. Man takes from all of them. But man has to echo back the grace that he receives. One way is care and toil for plants and animals. Yet it does not suffice, for matter is not all. If earth gives us her love we must return her love and open our hearts to all her needs and wants. As a mother bears and rears her child, who grown to manhood takes her in his care, so waits the earth for our care and thoughts. She is the mother. We, child and man, are her offspring and also her shield. Let us serve her well, my sons and grandsons. Daughters, listen too. Live as pure as Sita who sprang from the soil and turned to it in greater purity. Love land and well, as god and earth love you."

At first there was no sound. Only after a minute or two did Father ask for his mother's blessing.

Before the great event the whole clan fasted and took purifying baths. A goodly number of neighbours offered their help in addition to the use of their tools. Father had accepted some of the second and third sons who could be spared from their own fields for a day or two. With the men of the clan there were ten workers when the digging started.

"Here! This is the place marked by the water-diviners." Father pointed to the exact spot. The neighbours would have

known anyway, as bricks, mortar, and tools were piled in readiness, but the pointing made him glad. The well would be in the very centre of his best fields. It could not have been better.

The well was to measure twelve feet in diameter, with the bottom about seven feet. As the lowest part had to be constructed first Father now set the men to dig a ring seven feet in diameter.

Digging was slow. Beneath the surface the first few feet were hard soil. Men worked in relays, while boys carried away the earth in iron basins. There was little talk. Everybody was eager to get on.

"It is getting easier," said Lachchmaniya when, after several hours of strenuous work, they were down more than three feet.

"There seems to be a trace of moisture already!" Youngest Uncle said hopefully.

Father examined the specimen of soil handed to him. "Not yet. But pretty soon. It is time to start the brick laying. You can't stoop any farther."

They began to fill the ring with kiln-baked bricks in irregular layers sealed with mortar, while others dug out a space outside the ring for standing room.

Still others, standing on the brick ring, dug and scooped out the centre. The boys trotting to and fro with their basins could scarcely keep up with the clods.

"There is real moisture! This time there is no mistake about it!"

Faces lit up, but Father did not allow any cheering. It might be inauspicious. Even when water was struck it might dry up overnight.

The brick ring sank down between the hollows of centre and circumference. Whenever its rim was about six feet below the surface, more bricks were laid upon it. Father took good care to widen the diameter towards the twelve feet it was to measure

at the top. By now digging had become much easier and faster, as the strata of earth became looser. Even small girls were helping to carry away the mud.

Father looked at the sinking sun, which deepened the desert greys into mauves and blues. "Enough for to-day, brothers. Soon it will be dark. May Varuna, the great god whose loins are oceans, and who yet is present in every tiny current beneath our fields, grant each of you enough water for your soil and cattle!"

They all were loath to go. The well was about eighteen feet deep. All would have been glad to finish the job at one go. But what could you do in the darkness?

"To-morrow we shall strike water," they said to Father as they took their leave. "By now we know there is enough water. Thine will be a good well."

In the early hours of the morning Father tossed about on his cot. Their work had been blessed, and there was no need to dig anywhere else. The water-diviners had been right. Still, there might be obstacles even now. However much moisture they had encountered, there was no certainty. You never knew when the water might vanish in a stratum of treacherous sand. It might be necessary to dig twenty-five or even thirty feet. He would not be able to afford that much for bricks and mortar. No, these were sinful thoughts born in the blackness of the night by demons who wanted to frighten human beings. Abundant moisture was the forerunner of water. The gods were merciful. There would be the well.

"Is everything ready, Daughter?"

Dulari smiled. "Here are the sugar wafers, Mother-in-law. Here the halva. Has it the right consistency?"

"There is no need for my tasting. Thou hast a lucky hand, a hand blessed by Maha Lakshmi, the great goddess of prosperity."

In spite of being a daughter-in-law of almost eleven years' standing, Dulari blushed with pleasure. "Thou art too good to me, Mother. What I would have done under another mother-in-law I do not know."

"Thou wouldst have been a good daughter to her too, I think. Now let us see the other dishes. Perhaps I should have let thee cook them too. But Shanti will soon go to a husband's house. She must be able to cook well, lest her mother-in-law find fault with her. So I let her prepare to-day's curry and dhal all by herself. They smell good, don't they?"

"Little Sister is very clever at cooking." Dulari never missed an opportunity to praise her lord's sisters.

"The taste is good too. Thou didst well, Shanti. I am proud of thee. Now put on other clothes. Yes, the yellow ones I printed last month against thy betrothal. This is a great day. We shall have our well, and it is fitting that we be in festive dress. For thy wedding there will be another outfit in place of this."

Shanti reverently took the garments from the only chest the room held and hurried off to take her bath.

"All my daughters have clever hands," Mother continued with satisfaction. "How I wish they were all here to-day—Koshaliya, Lajja, Shushila!"

"Lajja often asked me whether I thought we'd ever have the well." Dulari smiled in recollection.

"If she were here to-day she could behold the well with her own eyes. I can see it from where I stand, across yard and fields. Oh, look! Here they come already! Mother-in-law, they come! My man carries a bucket! There is water! There is the well! Hurry, daughters, hurry!"

Graceful as a young girl, Mother ran into the courtyard. There was Dadi, her eyes on the approaching column of men. From right and left other daughters-in-law and granddaughters appeared in gay clothing, to take their places behind her.

The procession came near. On other days men clustered together, the elders first, then the younger, just as it might happen and according to their alliances and talk and jokes. To-day it was different, although not by plan or arrangement. Quite naturally the uncles fell behind Father, to give him precedence while he carried the first water the well had given. It was equally natural for Rameshwar and Vikram to walk side by side instead of mingling with the cousins as they usually did. Brothers went with brothers, the youngest among them in the rear.

When the procession reached the yard the men stood still to greet Dadi with folded hands. Father alone stepped forward. Placing the bucket at Dadi's feet, he took a gleaming brass vessel that Mother handed him, filled it, and presented it with both hands to his mother.

Dadi's wrinkled face broke into a smile. In one glance she took in each face of the three generations who breathlessly followed her every movement. Slowly she raised the vessel to her lips and drank.

What would she say?

Suddenly a cry went up from all of them. Dadi had dropped the vessel. With trembling hands she pointed to the bucket.

Father turned white. He could not move. It was Elder Uncle who scooped water into the brass vessel, pouring a few drops into the outstretched hands of each of his brothers and, lastly, into his own.

Each of them sipped the water. Each of them spat it out.

Then even the children realized that the workers had struck a current of bitter water. The whole work had been in vain. There was no well.

No one looked at another. None spoke. . . .

It was the next day that Dadi died.

IV

SPRING WAS IN THE AIR. IT HAD NOT ACTUALLY SET IN AS YET, BUT this was already the month of preparation for Holi, the spring festival. Each night Sitapur lay nearly deserted. Like the young men of every village in the district, those of Sitapur tramped after working hours several miles to Anandpur, the nearest town. There they sat on the maidan from about nine to a little after midnight, drinking country liquor, exchanging news, cracking jokes, and singing in chorus. There was the usual rivalry between village and village, though less than at any other time of the year. The spirit of the one festival that knows of no distinctions or segregation made itself felt in advance.

Vikram loved those strolls to and from Anandpur, though they took him away from Dulari's side for the better part of the night. It was pleasant to walk in the evening breeze, singing lustily and watching the weird forms and shapes the familiar landscape took on in the light of the waning and later the waxing moon. It was pleasant to be in town, meeting old acquaintances, seeing new faces, hearing all sorts of news and drinking strong raisin and orange wine. But what he liked best was the return across the fields that smelled of growing crops and of spring. There was either good talk or good silence, broken by songs that were of spring and of Holi. In moments of silence Vikram could get the feel of the fields, whose contented maturing was almost palpable. And when he came home, his body fresh and invigorated by the walk through the coolness of the night, there was Dulari surrounded by their children, her cheek as cool, her breath as sweet as the scented desert wind he had still in his nostrils.

She too loved these weeks before Holi, though it was hard to

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go through them for the first time without Dadi. Women did not walk to town. They stayed in their village, gathering in one another's houses for songs and talk. Dadi had not gone with her daughters and granddaughters to these nightly outings, but to Dulari it seemed that she had been the very soul of everything. Next day she knew how to explain each song, each custom the younger women were discussing. Compared to her, Dulari felt ignorant, devoid of any knowledge. Yet sometimes when the children asked their questions, or problems came up at the nightly gatherings, she suddenly knew how to answer. The knowledge she did not possess came to her when it was needed. How could that be? Had she become rich in all her poverty because Dadi had made her so? Was it the thoughts of Dadi which spoke through her at such moments?

That the dear one had not lived to see the well! For there still would be a well, even though Kunti jeered, if she was out of Mother's hearing, and said that there never would be any. Of late Kunti had been more and more openly hostile. Without Dadi's all-important presence, and with Lajja and Shushila gone, there was no one to stand by Dulari. When Kunti's bickering had begun soon after Dulari entered the family, Shanti had been too small to realize that something was amiss. She grew up to take her eldest sister-in-law's moods for granted. But Dulari, the chief butt of Kunti's scorn, was well aware that matters were going from bad to worse. Kunti's jealousy was no longer directed against the sister-in-law who had given her lord three healthy and surviving sons, while she herself had borne only females. Dulari knew that Kunti envied violently the happiness that she enjoyed with her lord. Why? Had she not Rameshwar, the first-born, for her man? True, he was not as strong as his younger brother, not as handsome, not as clear of voice and of mind. But then who could be? There was no man to equal her own lord. But Rameshwar was Kunti's man, her lord, through whom alone she could find bliss in this life

and salvation in the next. Why did she not make the best of it? Why did she watch Dulari's happiness with such hungry eyes? Sometimes, while waiting for her lord at night, Dulari felt as though Kunti's thoughts were with her on the cot, as though they wanted to tear her to pieces, to squeeze every breath out of her. Was she laying an evil spell on her? Dulari knew how to meet that. There were counterspells which her own mother and Dadi had taught her. But she made no use of them. She could not forget the night on which her mother had tried to halt the fate that awaited her and her spell had failed. But Dulari did not feel afraid. Her happiness was her best shield.

"What is rice, Mother?"

Dulari laughed. "Thou art three years old, Sita, and canst not remember khir? Thou hadst it last Holi. Again and again thou didst ask for more."

"Is rice halva, Mother?"

"No, daughter. Halva is made of wheat-flour, ghi, and brown sugar. Sometimes other flours are used. It is time for thee to learn about this. Some day thou will go to a husband's house, and then it will be for thee to prepare good sweet halva. But rice is different. It has pearly grains and they are not ground. I'll show thee when the time comes."

"Why don't we ever eat it, Mother?"

"Because rice is a thing rare and sacred. The people in the south of Hindustan eat rice for bread, as we do wheat and barley and gram. But we Rajistani eat rice only once a year, on the eve of Holi. That is when we boil rice and mix it with ghi and sprinkle it with brown sugar. That is the khir thou didst so relish."

"Is to-night the eve of Holi, Mother?"

"Not yet. There are still a few more days—let me show thee on my bangles. One, two, three, four, five, six, seven. Seven more days and then it is Holi."

"Tell us about Holi, Mother!" Bhagwana had sidled up to the little group. "Is it true that there was a sage who said one day that everybody should throw colour and laugh and dance, and that was Holi? Some boys have heard a sadhu at the rest-house say that it was so."

"I don't know about a sage, Eldest Son. I have never heard of him. But I remember what Dadi told about Holi."

"Tell us what she said, Mother."

Dulari took Bishmaniya from her breast and settled him comfortably on an old rag torn from a dhoti of Vikram's. How well and happy her baby looked in the sunshine! Sita and Meeka were happy, too, fashioning dung-cakes out of mud. Bhagwana in some ways reminded her of Shushila. He always wanted to know things, this beautiful eldest son with whom the great goddess had blessed her.

"Yes, Son, I will tell thee of Holi." Dulari set her spinning-wheel in motion. But before starting her tale—Dadi's tale—she made sure that her veil was in posture. To talk of sacred topics with head uncovered would be irreverent.

"In our fair land of Rajistan there lived once upon a time a great king with his son Prahlad and his daughter Holka. Soon the princess was given away in marriage, and the King remained alone with Prince Prahlad. He could have been happy, for his son was all that a son and heir should be. The gods had blessed him with uncommon beauty, strength, and merit. Though he was still a child, there was no target he could not hit, no shaft he could not bend, no hurdle he could not take. Hearts opened to him because of his goodness. All should have been well, but it was not. For the King worshipped the great god Mahadeo, and his entire devotion was to him. Prince Prahlad went with his father to the temple. He also brought offerings to Mahadeo and worshipped him dutifully. But he did something else, too. He gave his devotion to Sri Ram, the ancestor of all Rajputs and Jats, the founder of every royal

house. But this his father would not permit. Advised by the priests of Mahadeo's temple, the King decreed that Prince Prahlad was to worship Mahadeo alone. He was not allowed to use the name of Ram.

"The Prince tried hard to obey the order, but he could not. Obedient as he was in everything else, as a son and heir apparent should be, he kept on speaking of Ram. No punishment was of any avail.

"The King became outraged. He punished the Prince by taking away his bow and his white stallion. He beat him until the blood flowed. He starved him, he even used torture. But, whatever his father did, Prince Prahlad continued to speak of Sri Ram.

"It was at this time that Princess Holka, now the wife of the heir apparent of a neighbour state, returned home for a visit. The King complained bitterly of his son, her brother. Many hours and days did the King and Princess put their heads together. At last they decided that the only way to silence Prince Prahlad was death. So they plotted to burn alive their son and brother.

"The pyre was duly prepared. Then the King sent away all nobles and servants lest they know what was happening. Only he and his daughter were to be present. Together they fetched Prince Prahlad. Together they bound him to the pyre. Then Holka held her brother down while the King set fire to the logs that bore his son.

"But the gods intervened. The leaping flames devoured the sister but kept away from the brother. Holka died the death that had been intended for Prahlad. He was saved and lived to be a great king.

"That is why we celebrate Holi. Holka was not good. Had she been as a woman should be she could not have given her father such evil advice. She could not have helped in the crime. She met a just end, deserving the death she died. The festival

of Holi commemorates that death and her brother's rescue. The gods are great."

"Indeed they are!" Bhagwana cried. "Why—how could the King forbid the name of Ram? And he a Rajput, a king in Rajistan! Prince Prahlad was right. I would have done as he did. I would have spoken of Sri Ram every day, every hour!"

"I know thou wouldst have, Eldest Son." Dulari smiled proudly. Nobody could surpass her son.

V

ORTHODOX HINDUISM, WRAPPED UP IN SEGREGATION OF EVERY KIND and magnitude, does not know of sociability and social standards of living. People are confined to the society of their caste fellows. Women are confined to female company. There are barriers between caste and caste, between clan and clan, between generation and generation, between man and woman. Even brother and sister are kept apart. Everybody is pressed into closed and separate compartments. People do not know one another, and across the barriers there can be no give and take.

Holi is the feast of feasts because it is the antidote to such segregation. There is the legend that the Holi festival was begun by a great sage who was deeply concerned about the gradual dying of Hinduism into the frozen stagnancy of segregation. History does not speak of him, but it does not matter. Whoever began this breaking down of barriers was full of profound wisdom.

In Rajputana Holi was at first celebrated to commemorate the rescue of Prahlad. Later, in the times of Krishna, about two thousand years ago, the festival was deliberately turned towards sociability.

Before then one of the impassable barriers was that between the people who conquered and the people who had been conquered, and the ancient Hindu laws of caste and the preservation of caste purity were inexorable. Conquered people were classified as outcastes, to remain so for ever.

But Krishna altered this.

He came from the stock of the conquered, of purely Indian descent. Yet those who gathered round him, who vied with one another to serve him, were descended from conquerors. Indian art has always depicted the Gopis as bright-eyed, arch-nosed women of fair skin and Aryan characteristics, dancing with a Krishna so dark-faced that painters used blue instead of only brown to show the pigment of his skin.

If the life of Krishna signifies the first breakdown of the barriers between the invaders and the original inhabitants of India, rigid caste laws still perpetuate them all the year round. Segregation is worse in towns than in villages, and worst in the highest strata of society. Wherever human beings turn, whatever they do or think or hope, there are inflexible rules to hedge them in and keep them apart from those who are not of their own caste and generation and sex. Holi is the only time when the rules do not prevail.

During the festival there is no distinction of any kind. All barriers vanish and low castes and even untouchables mingle freely with the highest caste. If a sweeper touches a Brahman no purifying bath is needed, for the spirit of Holi knows of no pollution. A menial can throw coloured waters on a king with no other consequence than fun and laughter. A peasant can drench the kamdar from head to foot, and will get a smile for it.

Within the family the extreme modesty that keeps the members apart for the rest of the year vanishes for the duration of the festival. A son can address his father unasked. Brother and sister can meet freely. A woman can speak to her husband's brother, and a father can speak directly to his daughter-in-law,

without having to make his wife the go-between. Wife and husband talk in public. People cease to be the ruler or subject, father or son, man or woman as such. One and all are human beings. Everybody is alike and part of the brotherhood of man.

Perhaps if the spirit of Holi were allowed to pervade every realm of life all the year round instead of during two short days India could become again an earthly paradise.

VI

AT DUSK BONFIRES BEGAN TO BLAZE ON THE CROSSINGS OF ROAD AND lane. It was the eve of Holi.

The people of Sitapur gathered on the patel's maidan, where the biggest bonfire of all was burning lustily. Nobody capable of walking had remained at home. More often than not an invalid rode on a kinsman's back so as not to miss the celebration.

In the flickering red-golden gleam shed by the flames a bamboo pole was rammed into the earth, with ten feet left above ground. Sheaves of dried grass were piled against it and on its top until it seemed a slender haystack.

"Now!"

Boys vied with one another in setting fire to the mock pyre. Loud shouts greeted the soaring flames. Girls between twelve and twenty stepped forward. They had carefully fashioned all sorts of cow-dung ornaments for the occasion. Now they flung the mock jewellery into the flames. Each time a bracelet, armlet, or anklet was swallowed up by the blaze there was wild cheering. Here was Holka's jewellery joining her in her well-deserved death.

When pyre and jewellery had fallen to ashes people went

home with jokes and merriment. A meal of rich foods heavy with sugar and ghi was waiting them. True, there were the customary dishes of great occasions like wheat halva and shredded chappatis. But in honour of Holi, Mother herself had prepared small pancakes, very crisp and thin, using up a great deal of ghi. There was the sweet rice that to the Jats is the greatest delicacy of the year.

In the flicker of their own bonfire Bhagwana and Gangu took hold of their father. They wanted to show him the colours they had hoarded against to-morrow's colour-throwing. Each taking one of his hands, they raced him to the spot where they had hidden their treasure to safeguard it against greedy cousins who, most probably, had taken the same precautions against them.

"Red and yellow and green!"

"Purple and russet! Look, Father!"

Though almost twenty-eight, Vikram was not yet above being as excited as his sons about colour-throwing. He heartily approved their hoard. "That's a good supply you have. Where did you get all the money?"

"Father's Mother gave us three annas."

"And Mother let us have another two."

How like Dulari! She would spend on her sons but not on herself. Nor had she mentioned this to him.

"This will get you far. If you mix enough water with these colours you'll have more than you need and to spare. But if you upset your vessels or something else happens, come to me for more money—not to your mother."

Bhagwana and Gangu ran away hand in hand to tell their cousins that nobody would have as much colour as they. Father was splendid.

Vikram contentedly puffed at a cigarette of tobacco leaves that he had rolled himself. Great boys, these sons of his! Bhagwana would make a good head of a clan some day after poor Rameshwar's time. How awful it must be not to be blessed with

sons! No son to crack open the father's skull on the funeral pyre!

That reminded him. He must join the others. What a foolish thing to stay here by himself, smoking a poor cigarette when he could be sucking the hookah with the other men! Alone on the eve of Holi!

Getting up in the darkness, Vikram turned briskly towards the courtyard, when he touched something soft and fragrant.

"For shame, Younger Brother! So to frighten me!" Kunti's voice was full of laughter.

"Oh, is it thee, Elder Sister? I could not see in the darkness. But I should have heard thy bangles tinkle. How is it they did not herald thy approach? Didst thou throw thine own into the fire with those of the girls?"

"Thou canst hear my bangles now, Younger Brother. I have them still. Listen!"

She made a few dancing steps. Bracelets and anklets tinkled in harmony with her laughter.

It was just as in the years before his marriage, when the music of her bangles and her step had delighted him. What a shame that she had borne only daughters. As things were now with Rameshwar, it did not look as though there would be more children. Life had been hard on Kunti.

"So thou hast not thrown thy trinkets into the flames?"

"No, I have kept them. They can tinkle a lot more than they do now. Maybe thou wilt hear that—some day."

What did she mean?

Another peal of laughter. "I must go, Younger Brother. Mother might look for me."

"Why, this is Holi! Nobody can say anything. Stay on, Elder Sister."

For a moment Kunti wavered. Here she was, at last alone with the man she craved. Only a step or two separated her from him. Once in his arms . . . No, he was not yet ready, and

nothing should be risked so soon. She had better wait till the crops stood high and it was again his turn to watch the fields by night. Reserve would make him all the more eager. All these years that she had waited in vain! That bitch of a wife they had got him from Govindpur still held him. Well, it would not be for long—after to-night. She had won. She could afford to be cautious now.

"No, I must go, Younger Brother. There will be other times. There will be——"

"Elder Sister——"

A quick movement. A whiff of jasmine. A tinkle from the distance. She had gone.

After a fine morning meal the whole of Sitapur set out to visit. The men of the family began to descend upon relatives, friends, and afterwards upon anybody. Women went out about an hour later, with the timidity of the weaker sex. But they were bent on the same errand as their menfolk, each and all to "have Holi" with kinsfolk and outsiders alike.

Everybody was carrying a vessel of some kind, filled with waters of violent hues. Powdered colours were secreted in loincloths or turbans, in bodices or skirts. During all other festivals women wore their best garments, while men who were rich wore long coats and those who were not donned shirt and coloured turban instead of the homespun loincloth and turban of ordinary days. But Holi, being the feast of feasts, has its own laws even in the realm of clothing. Because of universal colour-throwing it would be foolish to wear good garments. Everybody went out in working attire except for the coloured turbans of the men, the one expression of gaiety allowed in spite of thriftiness. Holi was the chief fun-making day in a man's life. Women, who had not the same zest for fun, tried to imitate men in their merriment—but how could they, being mere females?

When Father with sons and grandsons sallied forth to call on Elder Uncle's male household, they were met with showers of colour on their own threshold by the very people they had intended to visit, and who had been quicker. After a short tussle the two groups united to visit Younger and Youngest Uncles' abodes, all the while throwing colour, laughing, and coming to grips with each other. Great-nephews, who otherwise never dared to open their mouths in Father's presence, jumped on him to throw coloured water right into his face. Vikram got quite a lot of bright green on to Elder Uncle's pink turban and face. His own sons had drenched him already. Everybody was wet and streaked. If you kept your mouth open while laughing or shouting there was sure to be somebody—often one or two generations removed—to take advantage of your carelessness and to dose your inside with purple or yellow water, which you spat out amidst renewed laughter, while running to catch the culprit and dose him, too.

Finally the four groups merged into one and began to march towards the risaldar's house, there to resume the fun—no longer between kinsman and kinsman but between clan and clan.

Now groups of women made their appearance. When they met batches of men there was much teasing on both sides. Men remarked how easy it was for them to subdue women with their male charms. The women retorted by casting doubts on male prowess. It was too early as yet for hand-to-hand attacks by the women. That was for the second day of Holi.

Colour was thrown so lavishly that supplies hidden in clothes were no longer dry. People rushed home for more, or bought it in shops, and water vendors were in great demand.

Those who had stayed at home or had returned for a bit of breath were not allowed to stay in. "Have Holi with me!" some one would shout at their door. Those who resisted were dragged out, to be drenched and choked with coloured water. But nobody objected. When a group of young peasants broke

down the patel's door, behind which he had retired for a rest after four solid hours of uninterrupted milling, he laughed and was quick to throw colour in their faces. When untouchable children played hide-and-seek in precincts adjoining the temple, the Brahman keeper joked with them. Untouchable women pushed and were pushed by the risaldar's aristocratic daughters-in-law. Everybody " had Holi " with everybody.

Dancing set in. Groups of men formed circles anywhere: near the tank, on the patel's maidan, in a lane near the Muslim quarter, on the main street. One or two men went into the ring and started dancing to the accompaniment of singing and rhythmical clapping of hands. A short distance from them a group of women formed. Each group danced at the other in an interplay of question and answer. The songs and the gestures of the dancers were all based on sexual actions, but never did one group come near the other. Men danced in their own circle, the women in theirs. It was a contest between the sexes. Whose performance was more exciting, more to the taste of the onlookers?

Villagers despise the professionals who wear bells on their feet while dancing. To the villager dancing is no art that can be taught or learned. It is acquired by watching the elders dance. Then everybody can add or omit, according to his own taste. Some men delight in skipping and stamping, preferring footwork to everything else. Some women develop a special technique for movements of the arms. The bodies of the peasants are so exquisitely built that they can turn and twist with amazing alacrity for hours on end. The best dancer must be tireless. No Western dancer can surpass an Indian villager in endurance or grace.

The men had taunted the women. Now they got their reply from the women's side.

" No virility has man!
No child can he beget!
Useless is he to his wife! "

The men retorted, twirling their moustaches, their arms raised in the lingam gesture.

" Woman cannot stand up to virile strength!
She collapses before the beginning has even begun!
No valour has she! "

Other dancers stepped in, other groups were formed. But the theme and the dancing were the same everywhere.

Before sunset people began to go home to clean themselves and eat their second festival meal of the day. Everybody was tired, everybody was happy.

What colour meant to the first day of Holi substances of more earthy a nature meant to the second—ashes, dirt, mud, dung, and filth. Mercilessly people smeared one another's faces and bodies. If a man had enough strength to resist several banded together to overpower him. Partake of filth and dirt he must. It was ashes to ashes and dust to dust for each and all.

There was no loss of temper, and not even the cruellest attack evoked a harsh word from its victim. Rich and poor, caste and outcaste ate of dust, and ate together.

Women grew bolder than they had been the first day. Perhaps it was the knowledge that soon their short-lived freedom would end, perhaps it was the consequence of perpetual submission to male whims. Whatever it was, they went with zest and spirit against any man they could get hold of. They smeared and flung and teased and cursed, and even tore at clothing.

Men reacted with great restraint. They could have flung off a woman with a mere flick of fingers. They could have committed every kind of barbarity in retaliation for women's attacks. But they preferred to take a patronizing attitude, not unlike generosity. Men were the stronger sex, so why should they go against women?

Well before sunset general cleaning began. However much

water and effort one used, it was impossible to wash off the dirt at once.

At noon the food had been only left-overs. Women had not cooked. Now they prepared the traditional evening meal of the day, a meal that knows of no sweets or delicacies. After the revelry menfolk needed heartier fare. So they made thick chappatis with spinach or vegetable curry, with paste mixed from ground chillies and onions, with much salt, with whole onions. Holi was over. To-morrow there was work on the fields.

VII

DULARI WIPED HER BROW. IT WAS STIFLING HOT AS ONLY THE pre-monsoon days of June can be, with the sun blazing down on the desert sands whose wide expanse reflected the glare. Perhaps she felt the heat so much because she was with child. At the end of another four months she would be blessed with—— Would it be a boy? "Bear sons and still more sons." It would be good to have another son. But in her heart she did not care. Boy or girl, she loved them alike. Bishmaniya would soon grow away from her arms.

What a joy it was even to think of a good bath! But this was too much greed for May or June. If only she had a dipperful of water! With care one could be refreshed with a single dipper. Even drops gave relief. But how to give oneself a bath if there was not enough water for man and beast? However hard you worked at the well, the liquid you drew up was more and more muddy. The risaldar was kind, but his daughters-in-law frequently spoke of water scarcity. Trespassing on their bounty was hard, but it was harder still not to have enough water for the children. No longer did they object to the muddy

brew. They craved it and there was not enough for their thirst.

For the animals it was even worse. Men could manage with the over-ripe cucumbers which were sometimes found hidden under the parched leaves that rambled along walls and thatches. You combed each square yard until you were sure there was not a single cucumber left. Yet, if you searched again, there was a luscious green fruit waiting for you, a fruit so heavy with clear sweet water that the children clamoured to be given its tiniest succulent bit. The gods were merciful that men had cucumbers to tide them over to the day of the first rain. Cows and oxen were not so lucky. They had but parched grass to chew. They stood in the village tank, frantically trying to lick up what once had been water and now was evil-smelling mud. And even that was carried away under their very nose by thirsty people! How patient beasts were; they drank mud and yet they gave milk!

In spite of the heat Dulari resolved to roam about for some shrubs. She might even venture out into the jungle. Mother would not mind if she brought back a supply of fodder. After that she would hunt for cucumbers. For once she would think first of cow and oxen.

What is it that makes cholera take its course as though in waves, engulfing one village, sparing another?

One day Govindpur held eight hundred inhabitants. A few days later there were but seven hundred.

Of nine hundred and fifty in Bishmapur there remained eight hundred and thirty. But Gokulpur, the village rich in water and money, was spared.

People in Sitapur grew afraid. Would the dread illness reach their village, too? What could they do to appease the wrath of the gods? Perhaps there was a goddess of cholera as there was Shital, the goddess of smallpox. Shital had a day of her own

set apart each year, Shital Mai, a day on which women with small children went to the shrine of the goddess, placing coconuts, sweets, and flowers before her and praying for her protection. In consequence Sitapur had been spared the ravages of smallpox for a long time. Perhaps there was a goddess of cholera, too. Pehaps they had given offence by not worshipping her. Now they began to make offerings and devotions. The village priest sold many charms. People tried to protect their houses and clans with the aid of sacred plants, with spells and incantations. There was no thought of blaming the disease on water or unboiled milk or over-ripe cucumbers. How could there have been? The gods sent health or illness, and mere man could not go against their will.

It seemed to be their will that Sitapur should be engulfed.

The risaldar and his younger brother went first, then the patel, Elder Uncle's big wife and Younger Uncle, the late Hamira's mother and widow, and the heads of the Rajput clan to the south. Cholera seeks out the old and the very young.

When Meeka and Bishmaniya were taken ill Dulari was frantic. Her children, her beloved youngest! Would it be the same with them as with Jiji? No, the great goddess could not allow that. They would not die. It was terrible enough to see them suffer. Here was milk to ease their spasms, water to quench their thirst. She held them against her in a tight embrace, as if to will their illness into herself. At first Vikram had held Meeka if she held Bishmaniya. But this did not satisfy her. She must hold both. A mother was the one to protect her children, and from her arms they could not be taken away. Maha Lakshmi, the great goddess, did not refuse a mother.

Even when Vikram brought in the makeshift bamboo bier she did not let go of her children. They were not dead. They lived in her arms, she knew.

Only after she had fainted could the bodies be carried away to the funeral pyre.

VIII

VIKRAM AWOKE WITH A START.

How long had he been sleeping? Through the holes in the thatch he could see that the sun was still high. Why had he waked so early? He had had a lively night on his watch-tower, what with deer and their own cattle going after the crops. Walking home in the morning, he had looked forward to many hours of good sleep.

What had disturbed him? Life was not good now. Dulari had given birth to a girl two weeks ago. He could not see her for a long time to come because forty days must elapse between birth and purifying bath. During previous childbeds he had counted the days and hours that separated them. How happy he had always been at the end of the forbidden forty days! This time he felt almost relieved at not having to face her for another three or four weeks. However hard she tried, there always were tears in her eyes and voice. Women were strange creatures. They put everything into the hands of the gods, yet when the gods took their children they could not resign themselves. Or so it was with Dulari. Others were different. Kunti had lost her daughters without seeming the worse for it. Perhaps she had hidden her grief better than Dulari could.

No, life was not good. Two cows had gone off milk and another had given birth to a stillborn calf. There was no money to dig a new well. Even though the crops were promising, they had to save against Shanti's dowry and wedding feast. And there were some tax arrears again.

Well, if he could not sleep any longer there was no sense in remaining on the cot. Why not go to the tank to have a bath? It would be a pleasant thing to do in this crisp autumn air.

It was queer to think that he had never gone down that lane. After his bath Vikram looked towards the unexplored region east of the tank. When Rameshwar and he were boys Father had told them that evil characters dwelt in that direction, and his sons were never to go there. Whom had Father meant? This was no town. There were no prostitutes in Sitapur or in any other village. Who, then, were those evil characters? They would have avoided the Muslim quarter, where people lived in horrible filth and pollution, killing and eating animals.

Perhaps Father had not wanted them to know that none too modest widows might not be averse to meeting young men there. The shrines were always a good excuse to be seen around the tank. You could never trust a woman with no man in charge of her. Usually the late husband's clan kept her in order, but not always. He had heard that some of them went with men when the crops were high. Well, this was their time. The corn stood two feet higher than he was himself. Those widows liked to put men to shame and their tongues were sharper than any man's. Last Holi they had won the day. There had been that tall one who had danced so long. Bold as brass, in foot-work and gestures she had ridiculed the whole male sex. There had been that other widow, more graceful, softer of movement, yet with a tongue like a spiked flail. Did she not live somewhere behind the tank? He would like to measure himself with a woman like that.

But after a few steps he stood still. Would it be worth it?

Why not go home? There was Kunti.

"This season thou never bringest my food to the fields, Elder Sister."

"There was too much work for me to do, Younger Brother." Demurely Kunti lowered her eyes to hide their triumphant expression.

"Thou wouldst like to see the crops, I know. The cotton-husks are bursting. There is white fluff everywhere."

"Mother will not give me leave. Jagdish's young wife is always ailing. Who is to do the work?" She must not say that Dulari's childbed left more work to her.

"Once at least Mother certainly will let thee go, Elder Sister. Gram is at its best. There is no better food than gram picked berry by berry."

Kunti smiled, a far-away look in her eyes. "What other crops are good this season, Younger Brother?"

"Corn is standing high."

"I would like to see it."

"Wilt thou come to-night?"

"No. Not to-night. Another time—perhaps."

"I shall wait for thee."

Would she come to-night? Two days had passed since their talk, and at home she had avoided him. Bhagwana and Gangu had brought his evening meal to the watch-tower and had gone long ago. Everybody must be asleep by now.

Only two weeks were left before harvesting. After that he would no longer spend his nights on the tower. Why did she not come? Soon it would be too late. The crops were at their best. There was fulfilment in the air, earth and plants were breathing in contentment. What fragrance, what rustling of bush and leaves! It was hard for a man to be alone amidst such exuberance. Even heaven could not contain itself for bliss, for shooting stars too numerous to count were trailing their light across the night-blue sky.

Was that not a footstep? Perhaps a rabbit. How often had he deceived himself like this during these past nights!

But now—was it a rustling or a tinkle?

"Younger Brother!"

At last she had come!

"Where art thou, Younger Brother?"

In a moment he was down the ladder and standing beside her in the cornfield.

"I have come!" In the silver moonlight he saw that Kunti's face was jubilant. She threw back her head, her lips opened. She closed her eyes, waiting for his touch.

But it did not come.

Vikram, shocked by the nakedness of her desire, stood motionless. Suddenly he remembered that she was his brother's wife, the woman who was some day to take his mother's place!

Kunti opened her eyes and lifted her arms to him.

He must speak calmly.

"It is very late, Elder Sister. Thy lord will be waiting for thee."

Too stunned to reply, she turned and was gone in the darkness.

But before she reached home her head was high again. She had let herself go too soon, before he was ready. Men were slow. She must be more careful in biding the right moment. One day he would be hers.

Part Six

I

"Let us work out the cost." Father was addressing the family council as they sat under the big neem-tree, passing the hookah from hand to hand.

"I can remember the days, and so canst thou, Elder Brother, when one hundred kiln-baked bricks were four and a half rupees. Now they are five. We shall need fully seventy rupees for the bricks alone."

"Then there is the mortar to set them, and cement for the plastering."

"And stone slabs for the platform on the top of the well."

"And the wood for the wheel."

"Shall we make the trough of stone?"

"Can we not spare enough bricks and cement to build it? That would save expense."

Father looked expectantly to Elder Uncle, who had worked out the brick figures.

"Perhaps. The trough should be eight by six by four. With luck we might manage it with the bricks if we need not sink the well much over twenty feet."

"Fourteen hundred bricks go a long way."

"So does a well's shaft. Hungry as a she-rat it swallows bricks."

Father came back to the point. "Can we do it for a hundred and seventy rupees?"

Elder Uncle shook his head. "No. It will take fully two hundred."

For a moment nobody spoke. The clan had to think of dowries, too.

"We have about ninety rupees in hand," Father said. "Forty we shall borrow from Mohan Lal. He has already agreed. That means we are seventy short."

"Don't forget the dowry that Kispu's bride will bring this year. Three hundred rupees!"

"There are tax arrears to pay. And we have three dowries to provide during the next two years."

"The gods will help! We must have the well."

There was not one among them whose heart did not echo the words.

"Dost thou remember, Elder Brother? Now we are in nineteen thirty-three. Thirteen years ago we sat under this tree. Vikram's bride had brought her dowry, and we planned the well. Thou didst call for Ma to advise us."

They all seemed to sit up, whether they changed their position or not. Smiles were tender. Dadi had meant so much to all of them. Life had become poorer without her tangible presence.

"That is what she said under this tree, 'Grow grain and more grain, Eldest Son. Thou wilt need it all to weather the storm.'"

"The storms did come."

"Yet we are without the well."

"She said, 'Our fields cry out for the well.'"

"She said much more. Can anyone remember her exact words?"

"I can." Vikram raised his head. It had been after his marriage, the first time he had attended a family council as a fully-fledged member. Indeed he remembered everything. How could he ever forget?

"Speak, son. Those who were too young to hear thirteen

years ago should listen. What were Dadi's words?" Everybody looked up expectantly. Even the hookah was forgotten.

"This is what she said." Clearly and with deep feeling Vikram repeated the words remembered by all who had heard them.

"'There is something more I want to say, Eldest Son. Our fields cry out for the well. Our water cries out to quench their thirst. There is much water below our soil, the life-blood of the earth and all she is. At night I hear the seed surge and urge and speak to me: "Why must I die of thirst when help is nigh? Why am I not allowed to grow to grain? I will to grow, to feed both beast and man, to serve as fuel to the sacred flame. But parched and helpless must I starve to death." This I hear, my sons. The soil itself speaks: "I bear both seed and water in my womb. Their suffering is mine as is their joy. In them I breathe, in them I am and live. Each seed that grows upward gives me new life, each seed that starves brings me nearer death. The rain sent down from heaven is my blood, begotten and begetting. Let it be incarnate in plant and animal and man." Thus speaks the soil. We need the well, my sons. The well needs us. The very earth cries out.'"

"We dig the well!" Now, as then, Father took his decision. "We shall not starve the soil. The gods will help, and we shall find the seventy rupees."

"Thou hast a good memory, Nephew." Elder Uncle went close to where Vikram stood. "Dost thou also remember other words that Dadi spoke?"

"I do, Elder Uncle."

"We all remember."

"Let us not forget." Father's glance went from one to another. "She knew more than all of us together. Teach your children what she said, and our clan need not fear the future."

At twenty feet the first traces of water appeared. When night

set in the workers had passed the mud and there was water, sweet water. This time they tasted it at once.

When they returned in the morning the water had dried up. Not voicing their disappointment, they dug on, but their hopes began to sink. They had reached twenty-three feet and still had to go on. Would there be enough bricks?

Again the water-diviners had been right and they had struck water, but the well would have to be sunk deeper. They could not afford so much material. They had to give up.

Not counting the interest on borrowed money, a hundred and fifty rupees were lost.

II

"WE ARE HAVING A VERY GOOD RECITAL. I LIKE THESE BARDS better than those the risaldar sahib used to invite." Bhagwana spoke with conviction.

"They have good loud voices. But I don't like bards, whether these or others." Elder Uncle's grandson sniffed disdainfully. "They are shiftless people, without house or home. They never did a stroke of work in all their lives."

"To know by heart the whole of the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, and many other poems as well, is no work?"

"Not honest work like ploughing or digging a well. They prefer to roam about, to-day here, to-morrow there. If they behaved like decent people they would till their own soil and live in a house instead of sleeping under trees and tents."

Father came round the corner of the house and bent down as though to examine the hempen ropes they were overhauling.

"So thou thinkest the bards shiftless, Great-nephew. Dost thou know why they are without homes?"

The boy was taken aback. It was not every day that the head of the clan invited a youngster to speak his mind. He might get punishment from his own father for disrespectful behaviour towards his elders. Father's father's elder brother did not look angry and even smiled at him.

"They have no homes because they do not work for one, Great-uncle."

"Thou art wrong. The reason is another. Did no one ever tell thee?" It was not the boy's fault. His elders had failed him. Younger Brother and his two bickering wives, one of whom had died of cholera, had had so much quarrelling in their house that their children grew up ignorant of matters that any Jat should know.

"I only know that the bards have no village where they belong. If somebody calls them for a recital they do his bidding and stay with him for a week or so, as they now do in the patel sahib's house. He feeds and pays them well. So do the money-lenders if they invite them."

"The bards are always treated well, Great-nephew. Kings and nobles honour them, for they are the memory of Rajistan. If a prince wants to know the tables of his family back to Sri Ram he calls the bards, and they recite without error many thousand years of his forbears' names and marriages. But also in a village they are welcome. The host who invites them acquires much merit by providing his village with their recital. The twenty or twenty-five rupees he pays them is very little compared to what they offer."

"Twenty-five rupees! So much money—just for one week of chanting? During the day they have no work to do but eat and rest."

"Not a hundred rupees, not all the money in the world would repay the bards for their services, Great-nephew. Without them, what would we know of our past? Of the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, of Draupadi, of Nal and Damayanti, of

Shakuntala? They sing of valour, love, and sacrifice, of Rama's kingdom which made the whole of Rajistan into a paradise. They are the memory and the conscience of all of us."

"Why our conscience, Grandfather?"

"Because if we learn how good and upright the people in Sri Ram's time were we can try to live not unworthy of our ancestors."

"Everybody can?"

"Everybody should."

"Also the moneylenders? Also the kamdar?"

"They too." Father's eyes twinkled, but he would not go too much into this particular matter. "I will tell thee why the bards have no house and no home. Thou knowest of Alladin Khilji, the Muslim conqueror?"

"The accursed one who took Chitor?"

"That is he. When the fortress of Chitor fell, when all the Rajput princes and warriors went forth to meet their deaths, when under Queen Padmini as the leader thousands of Rajput wives and daughters burned themselves on the funeral pyre in Chitor's vaults rather than fall into the hands of the Muslim conquerors, the forefathers of our bards to-day vowed that they would not live under the roof of a house until Rajput rule came again to the fair lands of Rajistan. They left their homes and left their fields untilled. For many a century they went into exile, sacrificing what a man holds dearest, his home and his soil. To honour their ancestors' selfless vow their wandering grandsons still sleep under canvas or trees. From them we learn what loyalty means. They think of Rajistan, not of themselves. Should we not honour them, then?"

The boy did not reply, but his trembling lips said enough.

Two low wooden tables placed side by side with a third on top of them made the platform. Each night a clean white homespun cloth was spread for the two bards to sit upon. For almost

a week people from the neighbouring villages had joined the Sitapur crowd on the patel's maidan. The recital began at nine or half-past and lasted well into the early morning.

Vikram, on the male side of the audience, wondered if one day their clan would be able to hold a recital of their own. In the lulls between harvest- and sowing-time, those who were rich enough invited bards for a recital. This time it was the patel's turn; another time Mohan Lal or one of the other moneylenders would be the host. It was a good thing to do. With the money spent on the well that had twice eluded them they could have paid and feasted many a bard, but as the position was now a recital of their own seemed more impossible than ever. Poor Father. For a whole lifetime he had not been able to do honour to the singers.

"Here are the bards!"

"They must be tired after six nights' chanting."

"To-night is the last. They are coming to the *Ramayana's* end. To-morrow they can rest."

"No, they cannot. They go to Gokulpur."

"They seem to be in great demand."

"So they should be. They are the best singers we have had for a long time."

"When they sang of Sri Ram's grief after Sita had been carried into captivity they nearly wept."

"Hush. The recital is beginning."

For accompaniment one of the bards played a one-stringed violin, the other a pair of side-drums. One chanted the story in time-honoured rhythms, while the other gave running comment on the sacred tale which the audience had heard nearly every year, from early childhood on. From time to time they changed rôles.

Dulari was happy to sit here with her little ones, Sita, Dhapu, and Lachchmaniya nestling against her, and baby Widiya alternating between sleep and suckling at her mother's breast.

Looking round on the women's side, she could not see any children to match her own. Bhagwana and Gangu were already sitting on the male side. She had every reason to be proud and happy. But, as every time at the recital of the *Ramayana*, she was filled with an apprehension that held both reverence and regret. There were Sri Ram and his queen. After years of separation and unhappiness, after Ram and many other kings had fought the greatest of all wars to free Sita from her captivity, husband and wife were at last reunited. If ever there were cause for bliss it was now. But did Sri Ram take his queen to his heart? Could Sita, who had endured so much more than any other woman, be happy at last?

For she dwelt in Ravan's dwelling—rumour clouds a woman's fame—
Righteous Rama's brow was clouded, saintly Sita spoke in shame:
" Wherefore, Rama, with your token came your vassal o'er the wave,
To assist a fallen woman and a tainted wife to save;
" Wherefore with your mighty forces crossed the ocean in your pride,
Risked your life in endless combats for a sin-polluted bride?
" Hast thou, Rama, all forgotten? Saintly Janak saw my birth,
Child of harvest-bearing furrow, Sita sprang from Mother Earth."

" King Janak of Videha was Sita's father. Her mother was the earth herself, from whose pure womb she sprang," explained the second bard.

" As a maiden true and stainless unto thee I gave my hand,
As a consort fond and faithful roved with thee from land to land!
" But a woman pleadeth vainly when suspicion clouds her name.
Lachchman, if thou lov'st thy sister, light for me the funeral flame.
" When the shadow of dishonour darkens o'er a woman's life,
Death alone is friend and refuge of a true and trustful wife.
" When a righteous lord and husband turns his cold averted eyes,
Funeral flame dispels suspicion, honour lives when woman dies! "

Dark was Rama's gloomy visage and his lips were firmly sealed,
And his eyes betrayed no weakness, word disclosed no thought concealed.

Silent heaved his heart in anguish, silent drooped his tortured head.
Lachchman with a throbbing bosom funeral pyre for Sita made.

" Sri Ram himself never doubted the virtue of his wife. But because many of his subjects did, he could not open his arms to her. He knew that a king had to renounce his own happiness and to live according to his subjects' decision. Lachchman, Sri Ram's mighty brother, knew of Sita's innocence. Yet, in obedience to her wish and with a breaking heart, he did her bidding."

And Videha's sinless daughter prayed unto the gods above,
On her lord and wedded consort cast her dying looks of love!

" If in act and thought," she uttered, " I am true unto my name,
Witness of our sins and virtues, may this fire protect my fame!

" If a false and lying scandal brings a faithful woman shame,
Witness of our sins and virtues, may this fire protect my fame!

" If in lifelong loving duty I am free from sin and blame,
Witness of our sins and virtues, may this fire protect my fame! "

Fearless in her faith and valour Sita stepped upon the pyre
And her form of beauty vanished circled by the clasping fire,

And an anguish shook the people like the ocean tempest-tossed,
Old and young and maid and matron wept for Sita true and lost,

For bedecked in golden splendour and in gems and rich attire,
Sita vanished in the fire of the newly lighted pyre!

Rishis and the great Gandharvas, gods who know each secret deed,
Witnessed Sita's high devotion and a woman's lofty creed.

And the earth by ocean girdled with its wealth of teeming life
Witnessed deed of dauntless duty of a true and faithful wife!

The listeners were breathless in expectation. Many a time had they listened to the sequence, yet ever anew the wonder and the glory of it were almost unbearable.

Slow the red flames rolled asunder, God of Fire incarnate came,
Holding in his radiant bosom fair Videha's sinless dame.

Not a curl upon her tresses, not a blossom on her brow,
Not a fibre of her mantle did with tarnished lustre glow!

Witness of our sins and virtues, God of Fire incarnate spake,
Bade the sorrow-stricken Rama back his sinless wife to take:

"Ravan in his impious folly forced from thee thy faithful dame.
Guarded by her changeless virtue, Sita still remains the same.

"Tempted oft by female demons in the dark and dismal wood,
In her woe and in her sadness true to thee hath Sita stood.

"Courted oft by royal Ravan in the forest far and lone,
True to wedded troth and virtue Sita thought of thee alone.

"Pure is she in thought and action, pure and stainless, true and meek.
I, the witness of all actions, thus my sacred mandate speak!"

Rama's forehead was unclouded, and a radiance lit his eye,
And his bosom heaved in gladness as he spake in accents high:

"Never from the time I saw her, in her maiden days of youth,
Have I doubted Sita's virtue, Sita's fixed and changeless truth.

"I have known her ever sinless—let the world her virtue know,
For the God of Fire is witness to her truth and changeless vow!

"Ravan in his pride and passion conquered not a woman's love,
For the virtuous like the bright fire in their native radiance move.

"Ravan in his rage and folly conquered not a faithful wife,
For like ray of sun unsullied is a righteous woman's life.

"Be the wide world now a witness—pure and stainless is my dame.
Rama shall not leave his consort till he leaves his righteous fame!"

In his tears the contrite Rama clasped her in a soft embrace,
And the fond, forgiving Sita in his bosom hid her face!

Unheeded, Dulari's tears trickled down her cheeks. Was there anybody in this world to match Queen Sita in sublimest love and devotion? Far above any other woman she stood. She had

been wronged beyond compare, but her sole reply was love and sacrifice. " Serve thy lord as Sita Devi served Sri Ram. Be as good a wife as she, and all the world will praise thee! " Her grandmother in Govindpur had sent her into married life with these words, which sent every Hindu bride on her way. Her own daughters would one day leave her care under the blessed guidance of those words. She must bring them up as worthy daughters of Sita.

Dulari was so deep in her thoughts that she missed the recital of the royal couple's triumphant journey home in their aerial car, the journey during which Ram described to his beloved Sita the various parts of India over which they were flying. Vikram, however, listened to it all. At last King and Queen reached their home, the sacred town of Ajodhia. Courtiers and warriors, Brahmans and royal relatives welcomed them. There was Bharat to greet them, he who had reigned in his brother Ram's long absence.

Bharat took the jewelled sandals with the rarest gems inlaid,
Placed them at the feet of Rama and in humble accents said:

" Token of thy rule and empire, these have filled thy royal throne.
Faithful to his trust and duty Bharat renders back thine own.

" Bharat's life is joy and gladness, for returned from distant shore,
Thou shalt rule thy spacious kingdom and thy loyal men once more.

" Thou shalt hold thy rightful empire and assume thy royal crown;
Faithful to his trust and duty Bharat renders back thine own! "

Again the bards exchanged rôles. A rested voice was needed to chant the jubilant verses of the *Ramayana's* last canticle. The consecration of Ram the King was taking place. Both men and gods rejoiced to see Ram Raj, the reign of Ram, restored to earth—the reign that did not know of injustice or crime, disease or hunger, the blessed reign under which man and earth were happy.

And 'tis told by ancient sages, during Rama's happy reign,
Death untimely, dire diseases came not to his subject men.

Widows wept not in their sorrow for their lords untimely lost,
Mothers wailed not in anguish for their babes by Yama crossed.

Robbers, cheats, and gay deceivers tempted not with lying words,
Neighbour loved his righteous neighbour, and the people loved their lord!

Trees their ample produce yielded as returning seasons went,
And the earth in grateful gladness never failing harvest lent.

Rains descended in their season, never came the blighting gale;
Rich in crop and rich in pasture was each soft and smiling vale.

Loom and anvil gave their produce, and the tilled and fertile soil,
And the nation lived rejoicing in their old ancestral toil!

The bards thus ended their recital of the *Ramayana*. For a long time nobody stirred. Their thoughts were far away. Would they or their offspring live to see Ram Raj hold sway once more over a happy land?

III

WHEN KUNTI GAVE THAT ONE SHARP CRY ON A MORNING EARLY IN April Mother hurried at once to her first-born's room. Father, who had been ill for a day or two, followed. Five hours later Rameshwar was dead.

Dengue fever is the real scourge of Rajputana. At first the disease steps warily, as though hedged in by timidity. Only two or three persons fall ill. Then, as though it needed but the death of its first victim to gather strength, it unfolds its sinister wings. People die like flies. After almost a month the disease subsides.

Kunti had dreamed of scorching flames. Waking, she had

found Rameshwar's body burning hot against her own. She had spoken to him without getting any reply. It was then that she had cried out in great fear.

When the others arrived Rameshwar's head was bent back, as though neck and spine were paralyzed. Father then knew that there was no hope. Mother knew, too, but she busied herself with cooling herbs and draughts, directing and helping Kunti in tending her husband. When it became obvious that Rameshwar, unconscious, was unable to chew the tulsi leaves that are put in the mouth of the dying, she ground a few leaves in water, putting the sacred plant in liquid form on his parched lips. Here was a soul about to depart from one incarnation to rebirth in another. The evergreen leaves of the tulsi plant bespoke eternity.

Seeing Mother's portentous action, Kunti began to wail aloud. She had not loved Rameshwar, worse, she had despised him. But he was her husband. Through him she had the status of a married woman, the wife of the heir. She did not want that accursed Govindpur one to attain such dignity, and she did not want to be a widow, though, compared to Rajputs and Brahmans, Jats treated widows with kindness. Or was this, perhaps, the way out, the way to happiness? So far she had not been able to win Vikram, however hard she had tried. Now she might achieve her object in wedlock. It would not be the first time that a man had wed his brother's widow. But first she must behave as befitted her present position. Nobody should outdo her in widowed grief and humility. That would give the man she loved a good opinion of her and would outweigh her mistake of three years ago. Beating her breast, she wailed louder than before.

Vikram looked down at his brother. Rameshwar's breath went quickly and irregularly. Was there really no help for him? Must he die? This brother had been his companion from childhood. Jagdish and Kispu had been the little ones who did not

count. It had always been Rameshwar and Vikram, as though they were twins. Together they had tumbled about in the yard or sat on Dadi's knees; together they had climbed trees and bathed and raced one another; together they had learned to plough and sow and harvest. Everything had been bound up with Rameshwar, and Vikram could not picture life without him.

Father and Mother bent down to be near their first-born. Rattling sounds came from Rameshwar's throat, once, twice, a few times more. Then there was silence.

Kunti stopped her wailing. With head bowed, she divested herself of toe-rings and anklets, those tokens of wifehood, of bangles and bracelets, of necklace and earrings. It is not for a widow to wear jewels. With her lord gone, what is she?

For a second or two Vikram looked uncomprehendingly on the little heap of trinkets that lay before them all. Without bangles and anklets there would be no tinkle to accompany her steps. Then, with a sudden shock, he realized what had happened. Rameshwar had gone, and he was now the eldest son.

Father looked up, his face an ashen grey. "There being no male offspring, we must do the needful ourselves."

He tried to rise, but could not restrain an expression of pain in doing so. Mother was at once at his side. With her help he got to his feet, impatiently waving away any further assistance. Vikram was still too overwhelmed to move. Before he had had time to take in all the implications of being now the eldest, there were already new problems before him. Rameshwar had died without a son. Preparation of the pyre and the funeral rites had to be carried out by his next of kin. He, as the eldest brother, was responsible. To whom did it fall to crack open the skull of a man who had died without a son? To his father or brother? Vikram did not know. When cholera had carried away Younger Uncle three years ago there had been his sons to do all that must be done. Until now no man in the family had died without a

son, and there was no precedent. Praise be to Permatma that there was Father to tell him his duties.

Elder Uncle and Youngest Uncle with their sons now joined the mourners. Some members of the family went to the site for cremations which lay outside the village, there to build the funeral pyre. Had Sitapur been blessed with a river cremations would take place at its banks so that the ashes could be entrusted to the most purifying element of all, flowing water. Here the desert wind must lift them into the element of air. Other relatives were busy preparing the bier, and still others went from house to house, spreading the news of death and funeral to the whole of Sitapur.

Dulari and Jagdish's young wife, both carefully veiled because of male presence, brought in jars of water before retiring to the main part of the house. Under Father's direction, Rameshwar's body was bathed by his brothers. Their work finished, they clad him in a shroud on which they sprinkled vermilion in token of joy and festivity. On his forehead they painted the circular red mark of Hinduism. Then they strung the body to the bier, lest its position be disturbed on the long journey to cremation.

Meanwhile the women were busy under Mother's direction, though not with cooking, for on the day of death every one goes without food. Mother brought a small new earthen pot filled with fire, and it was set down near the bier. On the body's stomach she placed a ball of dough, exactly of the size for an ordinary chappati. Fire and dough meant that if on his journey the spirit were to feel hunger, everything needed for the preparation of hot bread was in readiness.

When the time came for the funeral procession to leave the house friends and neighbours had arrived, with two drums to accompany the songs of rejoicing that are sung on the way to cremation. For the soul, on its lofty pilgrimage towards perfection, has once again been liberated from bodily incarnation. Its next incarnation, however high or however humble, is a step

forward on the long road to consummation in eternity. Male relatives and friends must rejoice in the liberation, their every thought and action calculated to ease the transition. Tears and sorrow would fetter the departed soul to the past and so hinder its progress towards the future.

While a gay melody was being sung by all men present, the flower-covered bier with the body of him who had been in his past incarnation Rameshwar, first-born and son and heir, was carried from the house on his brother's and eldest cousin's shoulders. The drums beat loudly, and there were shouts of joy.

With the men at the place of cremation, the women of the family now went about their tasks.

While the body of her lord was being consumed by the flames Kunti shaved her head, with Mother helping her. Her hair is a woman's adornment. With her lord gone, what use is it?

Dulari and Youngest Sister-in-law carried Rameshwar's cot into the sun, and gave a fresh coating of cow-dung to the spot on which it had stood. When Mother and Kunti joined them the spot was dusted with flour. They covered the pattern thus made with a large basket, being careful not to gaze at it. It was for the returning men to lift the basket and find under it, traced in flour, the clue to the departed soul's next incarnation.

When they saw the returning procession the women began to cry and wail. Unlike men, they were not bound by lofty motives to expressions of joy. A woman can find salvation only through her lord, and it is not for her to think of his next incarnation. In this one she has lost her husband, her son, and women have the right to weep. But not for long. The men were already near, bent on lifting the veil of the departed soul's future incarnation. The women retired for purifying bathing.

At the cremation Father performed all his duties unwaveringly. On the way back, however, Vikram thought he saw him halt once or twice, pressing his hand to his side. But each

time Father had walked on so quickly that Vikram, in the rear, could not be sure whether he had seen aright.

Near the house Father stumbled, and Vikram ran to his side. Touching his arm, he felt it hot. Could Father be stricken in a matter of hours with the illness that had taken away Rameshwar? No, it was not that. Praise be to the gods, Father could move both neck and back. He was fully conscious, talking to the neighbours. This was not Rameshwar's illness.

Still, Father was burning with fever. Ought he not to rest instead of going on with the ceremonies? Mother was away with the other women, and it was no use asking Elder Uncle, who would only do something to disturb Father. He, the eldest son, had to decide by himself. Neighbours and friends were here, and the fate of Rameshwar's next incarnation had to be discovered. Father was indispensable. Yet should he allow him to go on, ill with fever as he was?

A moment later children began to arrive, out of breath from running. They had been sent to call their fathers and grandfathers. Illness had broken out in this home and that, and the men were needed.

Only two neighbours remained with the clan when Father went in to lift the basket. What would the flour-outline on the cow-dung indicate? A princely home, a man with a crown on his head? If so, there was no need to worry about the soul's next incarnation. Or would the design indicate a horse, a bird? To go from a human into an animal incarnation was a retrograde course, due to a sinful life. In that case the family must distribute much more charity than otherwise, to ease the soul's difficult path. If he was believed to be reincarnated into a horse, charity must be given to horses for a long time to come. The design on the ground gave guidance.

But before he could judge and speak Father fell to the floor, and the reincarnation of him who had been Rameshwar was never determined.

IV

THE THREE DAYS AFTER FATHER FELL ILL SEEMED TO VIKRAM AS long as the thirty years before them. He had known famine and bitter grief on the death of children; he had known despair over the well; he had seen Father's purple arteries standing out on the day when his head bore the stone. But, in spite of all, life had been carefree because there had always been Father.

Now everything had become different; Father was ill and Vikram had to take charge. Even the smallest happenings were novel. When Mother stepped outside the room for brief moments it was Vikram who comforted her, not she who comforted him. When he sat near Father's cot and saw the anxious question in eyes that looked immense in a suddenly shrunken face it was he who must tell Father that everything was as it should be.

But it was not true. The fever raged in Sitapur. Friends and relatives had died, among them Lachchmaniya, who had fought in the war across the Black Waters, and the late Hamira's two sons. The place of cremation was overcrowded. He had had to rush to Rameshwar's pyre several times to make sure that it was not being disturbed. Last night he had sent Jagdish to keep watch. Father, feeling that something was wrong, inquired after his younger son. Vikram, unused to roundabout ways, kept silent, whereupon Father had startled him by knowing the truth.

"Take good care, Son!" he gasped. "In times such as these a pyre is easily pushed aside by hurried people, even if still smouldering. It is good thou didst send thy younger brother."

Pressing his hand to his side, his face distorted by pain, Father lay still. Mother spoke in an undertone to Dulari, who with

Jagdish's young wife helped her to tend Father, both daughters-in-law carefully veiled. Dulari brought freshly crushed herbs to hold against the pained ribs, and warm mustard oil with which to rub the aching joints.

Father's face was working. "To-morrow—do not forget—the Brahman!" he said with difficulty.

Again Vikram assured him that all was as it should be.

But there were so many deaths that the village priest did not know whom to attend first. When Vikram reminded him that to-day, the third day after Rameshwar's cremation, the clan would go under the priest's leadership to the pyre to fetch home Rameshwar's skull, teeth, and ashes for burial in their own ground, the Brahman made a wry face. "As though there were only thy brother!" he said. "Many better men than he have died. Their families beg me with folded hands to attend for double and triple my usual fee, but I have to refuse them."

Vikram took the hint and promised much more grain than he had bargained for, but even so he could not be certain of the Brahman's attendance. His was the responsibility that Elder Brother's remains find decent burial, with the sacred texts spoken as they should be. Dogs and hyenas went after whatever they could get. Skulls might be used by evil persons practising black magic. People had to safeguard their dead.

The eldest son of the house squared his jaw. Rameshwar would be looked after properly, even if he had to contract new debts to satisfy the Brahman.

"Again he is weaker, Son. Light as a feather his body is now."

"Is there nothing we can do, Mother?"

"I have spoken the words that drive away fever. I have called upon Varuna and Brihaspati for their mighty help. Yet the fever burns and burns within."

"His voice seemed clearer to-day."

Mother did not reply.

"He spoke about Sultana, about the old kamdar, and about the cow whose calf died. How well he remembers!"

"The fever sends his mind wandering, my son."

"Mother!"

"Son!" For a moment she laid her head on his shoulder, for the first time in his life.

Would Father die? Water was rising in his lungs, and the women had invoked Varuna, whose loins were oceans, yet who lived in every tiny drop of water, and besought him to call away the waters from Father's lungs. But he was still gasping for breath.

It was terrible not to be able to help him. True, whatever came to man was sent by the gods, but to have one's father suffer without helping him was unbearable. If an ox hurt its hoof Vikram could set it right. If the fields were thirsting he could work overtime to water them, if necessary carrying the water-skins on his back day and night. If a fellow being was starving he could forgo his own food and give it to him who was needier. Yet here lay his own father fighting for breath—and he was unable to do anything.

Never had he felt so helpless, so tied down by fetters of heart-breaking injustice. You had to be a king to have a palace, you had to be rich to own your land, even to have a well you had to be wealthy. But air, and air alone, was every one's. Rich or poor, Brahman or untouchable, beast or human commanded the same limited supply of air. However poor and helpless they might be, each and all could breathe in the air they wanted. Yet Father could not. Here he lay, gasping for a bit of breath, a tiny fraction of the unbounded air that belonged to all. He who had always been so upright, so full of kindness to man and beast alike.

Could there be worse injustice? . . .

"Son!"

"Father! I am here."

"Canst thou hear me?"

"I can, Father. Every word do I hear, with my ears and with my heart."

"Look after—everything."

"Father! Do not speak thus! Father——"

"Be calm, Son. My time has come. There is thy mother. Honour her—always."

"I will, Father."

"There is Rameshwar's wife. There are the children. The children's children——" The words became inaudible.

"Father, I am here, I shall do thy bidding."

"The soil—water—the——"

"I shall dig the well. Dost thou hear me, Father? The land will not go thirsty. Dost thou hear? Father!"

There was no reply.

One by one Mother's trinkets fell to the ground.

V

ALTHOUGH NEARLY EVERY HOUSE IN SITAPUR HARBOURED DEATH OR illness, many mourners came to attend Father's funeral. He was not like any of the others who died each day. He was the one who had fearlessly stood up for the village. All their days the present generation would tell their children and grandchildren about his sacrifice, and generations to come would sing his praise. In spite of his poverty, Father had been the hero of Sitapur. When the patel arrived to attend the funeral eyebrows went up. Though it was his predecessor and not he who had put Father and the hungry villagers into the hands of the kamdar, the mourners looked askance at him.

The pot filled with fire had been set down near the bier, the ball of dough lay on the body's stomach, and amid shouts and songs of gladness the procession started. Some of the near kin carried brass vessels filled with water, to be sprinkled at cross-roads to prevent evil spirits from entering the body which, without the immortal soul it had served, was now but an empty shell.

Vikram had prepared himself for his duties as best he could, and had inquired about every detail from Elder Uncle. This was the supreme test of his life. If a man failed his father at the funeral pyre he was but a miserable being who would never be able to hold up his head however long he lived. Ignorant he himself might be, errors he might commit all his life, but he must not fail his father on the one occasion for which a man needs his son. As long as his soul lived in his body Father had not needed him. Now that he was on his way into a next incarnation the son had to take charge of the body left behind, to make sure that no obstacle stood in the way to future perfection.

This alone was to live in his thoughts, until all ceremonies had been properly carried out. That he wanted to weep—that he could not conceive of a life without Father's ever-present care and love—these feelings must be pushed into the background for the next hours. As Bhagwana, his own first-born, would not fail him at the time of death, so would he not fail his father to-day.

Here was the cremation ground with its smouldering fires and pyres ready for their biers. With so many deaths, families had found it hard to get the wood they needed. But there had not been any trouble about wood for Father's pyre, because all knew that it was needed for him whose head had borne the stone.

Carefully the bier was lowered to the pyre. Elder Uncle and Youngest Uncle tested its stand to make sure that the body would rest firmly and undisturbed on its bed of fire. All was in readiness. The eyes of the mourners rested on Father's eldest son.

Vikram took a step forward and prostrated himself before the pyre. When he arose he lit a torch from the fire carried in the earthen pot. Walking around the pyre, he set fire to the logs on which the body of his father lay.

Wood and twigs were dry. Crackling and hissing, the element of fire began its task.

When the leaping flames were about to engulf the corpse he seized the coconut that lay in readiness and, using all his strength, hit the base of the skull. The brain is the seat of all human powers, the home of the soul. Now that its master had left it void the son of the deceased had to make certain that this most precious tissue of all could burn itself safely out of the body.

His chief task was done; Vikram dropped the coconut. He had not failed.

What happened afterwards seemed to him as though shrouded in mist. Fire and embers were doing their work and the pyre could be left to itself for a time. Vikram led the mourners homeward. There was the basket to be lifted in the familiar room. There was a new kind of life waiting for him in the house, a life in which he was the principal male of the clan, with powers and responsibilities. But never again would there be Father.

VI

MOTHER, CAN I TAKE THE CHILDREN TO THE TEMPLE? I HAVE promised Sita that this time she herself would place our offering before the great goddess's feet. I shall be back in time to prepare the evening meal. Can we go? "

Mother smiled wistfully. "It is for thee to decide, Daughter, not for me."

"No, Mother, indeed it isn't. My sisters-in-law and I have never gone out without asking for thy permission first."

"But now thine own lord is the head of the clan, and, as his wife, decisions are thine."

Dulari rose quickly from her spinning-wheel. She took the dust off Mother's feet and put it on her own head. "Thou remainest my dear mother. I shall always ask thy permission in whatever I do."

Mother looked fondly at the new mistress of the house. "Thou art a good daughter, the best that ever was. But my lord has gone, and it no longer behoves me to give orders."

"Thou didst never order me. I ask thee because I want to. Wilt thou come with us, Mother? Dadi often did."

"While thou art away I will perform my worship."

"May I purchase some capers on the way, Mother?"

Again Mother smiled, but she did not reply.

"Mother, I am hungry!" Vikram called from outside. "May I have something though it is not yet meal-time?"

Mother pointed to Dulari. Food is a thing of bliss and affluence. A widow's sad fate should cast no shadow over it.

Vikram understood that his mother would no longer serve his food, so he talked of other matters that lay on his mind.

"At autumn harvest we have some interest to pay to Mohan Lal," Vikram said. "There is also the grain I promised the Brahman. With all these payments, in addition to taxes, dost thou think we should buy some good seed against August sowing?"

"This is for thee to decide, Son."

"But I want thine advice, Mother. Thou knowest best what Father would have done."

"Why dost thou not ask thy father's brothers? They should know."

"No, they don't. Elder Uncle always went against Father in one way or another. I want thy word. It will be Father's."

Mother's smile made her wan face beautiful. "The soil comes first. Father never let it hunger. Get the seed, Son. Good grain will help to pay the interest."

"That is what I felt myself."

"And what does Daughter think about it?"

Dulari blushed with pleasure. Though her lord had told her during many a long night all his worries about taxes and interest, this was the first time that she was officially consulted in matters of such importance.

Gratitude and love swept through Dulari. From the day she had entered the house as a bride Mother had been her friend, had taught and guided, encouraged and shielded her. Now Dulari would repay her. As long as Mother lived she should have precedence.

"Thou hast had one excuse after another, Daughter. But now it is enough. On my lord's death thou shouldst have moved into the big house. It is wrong for me to stay here by myself."

"I am so happy in our corner, Mother. Now that thou hast taken almost all the children into thy house we have room enough and to spare."

"It is not my house. It is thy lord's and therefore thine."

"Yet I would not miss the room thou gavest me when first I entered the family. I was so happy there."

"Please the gods, thou wilt be happy and blessed in this house, too."

"Do keep it, Mother. Thou hast lived here all thy life. Thy happiness was here."

"A widow does not need a house. Her thoughts should be of work and worship. My happiness will be to know thee here."

Dulari swallowed hard. There was nobody like Mother.

VII

A WIDOW'S THOUGHTS SHOULD BE ONLY OF WORK AND WORSHIP.

At first Kunti had accepted widowhood in an unexpectedly humble spirit. Nobody had ever known her so kind.

Now it was different. Though she had discarded her trinkets, ate less food, and performed the daily worship prescribed to widows, she did not accept her position. Dulari felt it, felt that Kunti hated her fate, and also hated her, Dulari, her luckier sister-in-law. The dark looks she gave her when they were by themselves! The sneer with which she greeted the tinkle of bangles and anklets!

Mother and Dulari had gone out of their way to make matters easy for Kunti after her lord's death. But Sister did not take kindly to kindness. She was full of rebellious feelings without ever putting them into words. Yet you could feel them. What was that flame that consumed her? She had never seemed to love poor Elder Brother. Was it——?

Such thoughts were evil. Demons must have planted them into Dulari's heart. How could she even for a moment ponder something so dreadful? Perhaps it was the memory of that unforgotten night at home. How fierce her mother's voice had sounded while chanting the spell that proved to be powerless. How could her mother's fate account for her present uneasiness? There was no resemblance except for the fact that two brothers had left widows. Her parents had never known the happiness that Dulari shared with her lord. Her own father had always led Mother a hard life, beating her almost every day and shouting at the slightest occasion. When he took his brother's widow for a second wife he did not shatter a happy marriage. Only here in Sitapur had Dulari learned how beautiful life could be if a home was full of love.

VIII

ELDER UNCLE WAS THE FIRST TO BROACH THE SUBJECT, WHILE HE and Vikram walked across the fallow fields.

"Hast thou already thought what to do with Rameshwar's widow, Eldest Nephew? It might be best if thou didst take her as thy second wife. She is still young. How else keep her chaste without a man over her? We must not have a scandal in the family."

Vikram stood dumbfounded. How could Elder Uncle suggest such a thing? True, it frequently happened that a man wedded his brother's widow, to protect the honour of the dead man and the clan. But good families did not resort to such practice, for their womenfolk were chaste in any case. Such considerations did not apply to a home and happiness like his and Dulari's. Marry his brother's widow? Not he. But how to explain this to Elder Uncle who, having taken two wives, could not understand such decency?

"I have not yet thought about it, Elder Uncle," was all he said.

"It is I, Brother."

Kunti had kept out of his sight for all these weeks. Now she stood before him while he was on his way to the tank. She had been to some shrine, no doubt, for widows must always pray.

"I have not seen thee for a long time, Sister."

Her huge eyes looked straight into his, then she lowered her lids, indicating by mute humility that it was not for a widow to speak. How softly her lashes lay against her skin! Although there was not the familiar tinkle, there was music in her movements, in her stillness.

"I am glad I met thee, Brother." She reopened her eyes. "I was so frightened."

"Why, Sister?" No mere cobra or panther could frighten a Jat woman.

"There was a man. He spoke to me near the temple. I ran away. See, I am still without breath."

How her bosom heaved! She must have been frightened indeed. But this could not be allowed to happen! When a woman was a widow any rascal thought he could make an easy prey of her. Widows were helpless and unprotected—especially innocent ones like Kunti, still beautiful. Those with cutting tongues and wit, a match for any man, could take good care of themselves— as long as they wanted to. But Kunti was not one of those forward widows whose brazen talk drove men away in shame. Praise be to Permatma that she was not, nor must she become like them. She had to be carefully guarded. Mother must—but Mother would not always be there. Kunti was still young. Who would protect her?

Suddenly Vikram felt burning hot. Had Elder Uncle been right?

Yes, it was the only way out.

As his second wife Kunti would find the protection she needed. He owed it to Rameshwar's memory to marry her.

There was the question of scandal, too. Kunti was hot-blooded, he knew. Never had he forgotten that night three years ago, and how beautiful she had been in the moonlight, opening her arms, opening her lips. It had been his duty to reject her then. There had been Rameshwar. But now, for her protection and for the family honour, it was his duty to take her unto him.

His pulse started racing. How would it be? Her laughter that was like music—her fragrance—her unfolding? Rameshwar had never been the man for her. At last she would bear sons. Many a good son would he give her.

But Dulari—she would suffer. She had made him as happy as man could be. How would she take a second marriage? Would she understand that he had to marry Kunti to protect the family honour? Would she understand that man and women were different in this, intended to be different by the gods who had made them? A woman was intended for one man only. A man could love more than one woman, if he was full of vigour. A woman was often ailing, giving birth or having the moon take her from her husband each month, or grieving over the loss of children. Though man grieved with her, all the while his blood was running lustily in his veins. Would Dulari understand, would she see that his love for her remained the same even if he took Kunti as second wife? Would her eyes overflow when the news was broken?

He could not tell her himself. He would ask Mother to prepare her.

"It is for thee to decide, Son—not for me. But do not forget what has been. In the whole world there is no better wife than thy Dulari."

"I know, Mother. I love her as I always did. Do tell her so. For the sake of the clan I have to wed my brother's widow. How otherwise can we make sure of keeping her out of harm? She is still young."

Mother could not contradict this argument. Her very dislike of Kunti made it all the weightier. She would have trusted Dulari implicitly, even in a lifelong widowhood. She did not trust Kunti.

Whatever else happened the family honour had to come first. Mother bowed her head and wept.

"It cannot be. I will not share thee with a second wife. Thou canst ask it of me? Have I not done my duty? Have I not given thee good sons? Where have I failed? Tell me where

I have failed so that thou shouldst take thy love away from me."

This was a new Dulari, a frantic woman that he did not know.

"Thou hast not failed me, Dulari-rani."

"Don't use that name! It hurts. Oh, how it hurts!"

"I use it because thou still remainest the queen of my heart. I do not take my love from thee. How could I? Thou knowest best how happy we are together."

"How happy we have been, my lord." Under the warmth of his words some of the wildness had gone from Dulari's eyes.

"We are happy and we shall remain so. But I have to wed my brother's widow. Canst thou not see?"

"I can't." Again her voice went off in shrieks while tears rolled down her cheeks. "I will not share my husband. Thou art my man. I am thy woman. We have sons. There can be no one else."

"Daughter, Daughter!" Mother, herself crying, well knew that no woman should be allowed to speak to her lord like this without restraint.

"I know how it will be. Now thou sayest thou still lovest me. Then it will be only she. I can't, I can't." Sobbing loudly, Dulari held her hands against her ears as though to shut out terrible words.

"Leave us now, Son. Thy wife will recover herself. She will abide by thy decision as a good woman should. Think of Queen Sita, Daughter."

She had behaved disgracefully. Praise be to the great goddess that Mother had reminded her of her duty. Her eyes had needed opening.

How could she have thought that her dear lord was wronging her? His love was not dead. He had said so, and in his eyes she had read that he spoke the truth. She was blessed above most women. Her lord still loved her.

Would he, would Mother ever forget her shameful lapse from duty? A woman should accept her lord's decisions as though they were God's. Whether he was cruel or diseased, whether he beat or starved her, she must take her fate from his hands with devotion and gratitude. That is what she herself should have done, even if her lord had cast her from him for ever, even if he planned to wed ten more wives.

Instead she had raved like a demon, while her dear lord assured her of his love. Was ever a woman so bad, so abandoned? How could she ever again raise her thoughts to Draupadi, the purest of the pure, or to Sita, whose love and patience had transcended everything? Dulari hid her face in shame.

When she was again ready to lift her countenance it revealed inner peace. Her mind was made up. She would atone for what she had done. She would serve her lord's second wife as though she were the mistress of the house. On whatever day her lord would command his wedding she would be ready with the wedding feast.

IX

"THIS IS NOT GOOD ENOUGH FOR MY DAUGHTERS!" KUNTI REFUSED to take the chappatis Dulari was handing her.

"It is what all of us eat, Sister."

"No, it isn't. I know what thou art doing. Thou feedest good food to thine own brats while thou keepest unclean flour to serve me and my daughters now that I cannot attend to cooking myself."

"Sister!"

"Yes, that is what thou art doing. Thou thinkest that a

widow must ge grateful for whatever dirty left-overs thou handest her. But soon I shall be rid of widowhood, and thou a forsaken wife."

Dulari rose to her full height. Quietly she faced Kunti. "If thou art not satisfied with this bread, Sister, I shall prepare a fresh supply."

"And then run to thy lord and his mother to tell them about the greedy widow? No, thou wilt not have this pleasure."

"Here is whey, Sister. Here mint relish."

"Thou canst not deceive me with such talk. Thou hatest me."

"I do not hate thee. Whatever is my lord's I honour."

Mother was picking melons outside the house. There was something in her eyes that made Vikram halt his steps as he came near.

He had left the fields early, leaving the others to work by themselves. He had meant to clean himself before going to the temple to ask the priest to name an auspicious day for his second wedding. Now he could not help but overhear the talk within.

When he had heard, dumbfounded, he turned away towards the desert. He must be alone to think.

How could he have been so blind after his years of marriage to Dulari? Had he needed to hear these words to understand the difference between her and Kunti? What overbearing pride, what wickedness in Kunti! What dignity, what love in Dulari! She was like Queen Sita. And he, a fool, had condemned her to the pyre. But he needed no fire god to tell him about his wife. He knew the treasure that was his and never again would he make her suffer.

Praise be to Permatma that the wedding had not yet been arranged. The gods had protected him from the abyss to which his own stupidity had led him.

He would not marry a shrew like Kunti. No wonder she had

made Rameshwar a sick man. As to family honour, he would see to it that it was kept untarnished. Kunti would be made to carry out the laws that govern widows.

But now he no longer wished for solitude. He must go to Dulari, she whom he had wronged, she who was flesh of his flesh and heart of his heart, the centre of his life.

Moonbeams shone through the thatch, awakening Vikram in the early hours of the morning. He kissed the plait that lay across his breast and, inch by inch so as not to awake Dulari, he stole from cot and room. He wanted to breathe deeply of the early morning breeze. His happiness was so great that it almost choked him.

If only he could tell Father about it! But surely Father was in him: in some mysterious way Father partook of the future that lay before Vikram as clear and bright as the desert shone under the silver moon.

What had he to fear? There was Mother and, somehow, Father. There was Dulari, the best wife a man had ever had. There were the children she had given him. There was the land. There would be the well.